

## **Saltspring Islanders struggle to prevent shutdown of operating room**

BRENNAN CLARKE - VICTORIA— From Monday's Globe and Mail - Published Sunday, Jan. 02, 2011 7:39PM EST

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Saltspring Islanders who have been fighting to save their hospital's operating room rang in the New Year with a renewed vow to stop the Vancouver Island Health Authority from shutting down the state-of-the-art facility.

"We are not going away and we are not giving up until we get our surgical services back," said Phyllis Bolton, a Saltspring realtor and founder of the grassroots group Save Our Surgery.

"This community needs an operating room. We're surrounded by water, the weather can make it tough getting to the mainland. If there's a critical incident, someone could die."

Island residents were outraged last June when VIHA announced plans to close the operating room at Lady Minto Hospital, just five years after the completion of a \$3-million upgrade that received more than a quarter-of-a-million dollars in community donations. Seven months later, the wound is still fresh.

"It's an absolutely dreadful, dumb idea to not have a regular surgeon and operating room in the Island," said artist Robert Bateman, a long-time Saltspring Island resident who contributed more than \$10,000 to the improvements.

"We had an operating room," he said. "We had a surgeon and we spent a lot of money on that upgrade. I'm not sure exactly what happened, but it doesn't make sense."

The community's hopes for the new facility began to fade early in 2008, when VIHA terminated the contract of the hospital's only surgeon, Roy Preshaw.

With little work left to do, the Island's only anesthetist left shortly afterward. Last June, with Dr. Preshaw's position still vacant, VIHA released a report that recommended "repurposing" the operating room's space and funding toward other programs, such as mental health, long-term care, maternity and rehabilitation services. Endoscopies, about 20 a month, are now the only surgical procedures performed at the facility.

Ms. Bolton's group received some much-needed support last month from the Capital Regional District health board, which had contributed \$1.2-million toward the Lady Minto operating-room upgrade.

In a resolution made public before Christmas, CRD directors urged VIHA to "live up to the commitment made to the taxpayers and residents of Saltspring Island and the CRD and continue to search for a general surgeon for Lady Minto Hospital."

Noting that the CRD's "capital investment has not produced the time frame that was intended," the resolution asks VIHA to "ensure the operating tables and other specialized equipment are kept on site" and refrain from carrying out any further renovations.

"If there was a way we would get our money back, I'd be willing to look at it," said Garth Hendren, CRD director for Saltspring Island. "The best you can say about something like this is it's unethical."

VIHA spokesperson Shannon Marshall said the health authority has "not heard directly from the CRD regarding their motion. When we do, we will respond to them directly."

Ms. Marshall said VIHA tried for 18 months to hire a surgeon, but couldn't find a willing candidate.

Critics say the position was turned down by at least half a dozen qualified surgeons because there weren't enough hours in the job description to justify making a living there.

"There is more than enough work for a semi-retired surgeon here if VIHA is willing to fund the surgeries," said Pamy Sira, a 71-year-old surgeon who worked at Lady Minto from 1995 to 2000.

Gil Mouat, a Saltspring realtor whose family settled on the Island in 1886, said Lady Minto's status as a full-service hospital has been a major draw for retiring baby boomers who have flocked to the Island in recent years.

"People are realizing that we now lack an adequate health-care facility for seniors," said Mr. Mouat, who also contributed money to the operating-room project.

"I'm disappointed, a lot of Saltspring residents are disappointed, that after spending all that money, the OR is closing down."

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/british-columbia/saltspring-islanders-struggle-to-prevent-shutdown-of-operating-room/article1855653/>