

Residents angry at lack of warning about prison, say Symonston has become "dumping ground"

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Justice Minister Shane Rattenbury. *Photo: Graham Tidy*

Inner south residents are angry at the lack of warning that a second full-time prison is to be set up on their doorstep, saying Symonston has become a "dumping ground" for the government's controversial facilities.

[Residents of Symonston, Red Hill, Narrabundah, and Griffith were sent letters on Wednesday](#), telling them that the Symonston Correctional Centre on Mugga Lane had been transformed into a full-time jail, ready to take any overflow from the chronically overcrowded Alexander Maconochie Centre.

The Symonston facility is currently only used for weekend detention, but the government has spent \$60,000 upgrading infrastructure to allow for full-time detention. It will be used only when the AMC reaches capacity, and will be otherwise closed.

The temporary prison will provide an extra 22 beds to help authorities cope with inmate numbers until permanent upgrades are ready at the AMC.

Inner South Canberra Community Council chair Gary Kent spoke to residents and business-owners in Symonston on Thursday.

He said many were disappointed there was no consultation other than Wednesday's letter.

"They're pretty disappointed, the first they knew about this is when they received a letter in the mailbox yesterday," Mr Kent said.

Mr Kent said residents had successfully fought off a proposal to have a full-time prison in Symonston during the 2001 ACT election, but now felt as though it had been foisted on them by default.

"There are some people who live and have businesses close to the site, and we would have expected that there would have been some personal contact.

"There should have been some warning that this was coming," he said.



Inner South Canberra Community Council chair Gary Kent said residents are disappointed at the lack of consultation on a temporary full-time prison in Symonston
Photo: Matt Bedford

Justice Minister Shane Rattenbury responded, saying the announcement was only made in preparation for a "contingency" that will only be used if overcrowding continued.

"If the population pressures continue we will exercise this option, but fluctuations in numbers may mean that this plan is not enacted," he said.

Mr Kent acknowledged Mr Rattenbury was doing his best in difficult circumstances not of his making.

He said the problem could be traced back to decisions made in the early 2000s [to build a smaller, cheaper jail in the form of the Alexander Maconochie Centre](#).

But he said there was a feeling among residents that Symonston had become a "dumping ground" for controversial projects.

"The residents live on rural leases, they should expect to be able to live in peace, enjoying their property in what is a very old, very beautiful part of Canberra," he said.

"There is a farmyard nursery where children attend during the week, and we've never thought it appropriate to have the sort of facility across the road that we have, and we never thought it would be upgraded to become a full-time substantive prison."

There are also fears that the facility could become permanent, despite the government's intentions to shut it down when the AMC upgrades are complete.

Mr Rattenbury assured the community that he had not intention of using Symonston full-time for "one day more than is absolutely necessary".

"This is only a contingency until new accommodation is available at the AMC. Until this time the facility will only be used on an as-needed basis," he said.

The community council will seek talks with Mr Rattenbury and assurances on security and the types of prisoners who will be housed at the facility.

Mr Rattenbury said on Wednesday that only low-risk, compliant prisoners will be sent there, and only after they pass a suitability assessment.

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