

Bethel Police in need of a new home

Page 4

INSIDE BETHEL NEWS

Wednesday, April 13, 2005

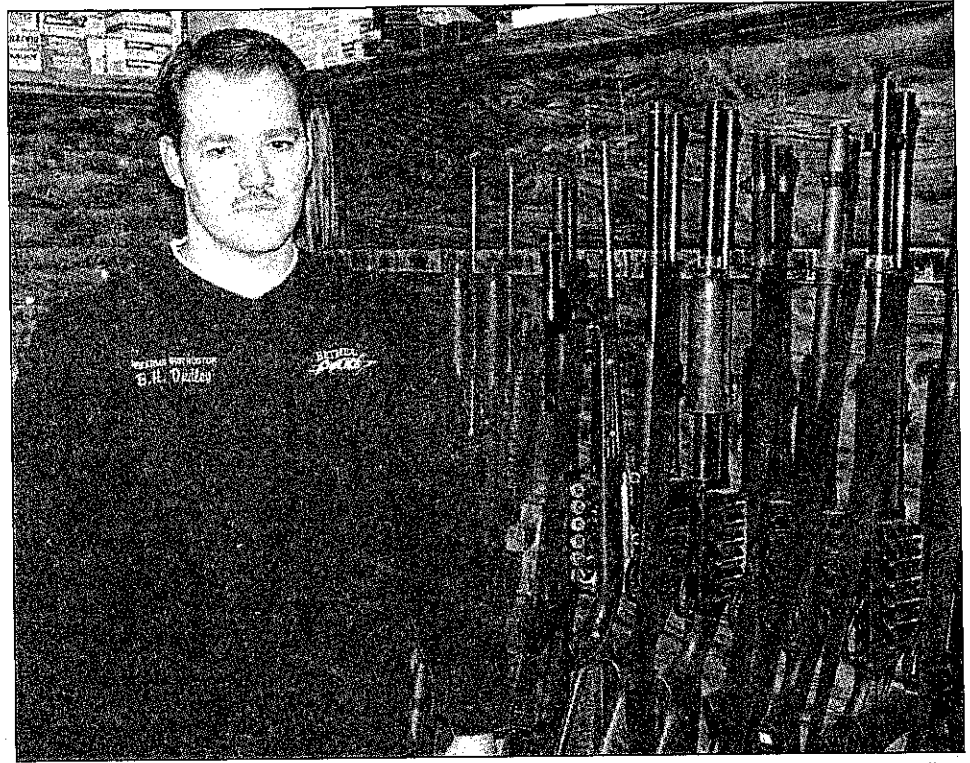


photo by Paul Basile

Police Chief Ben Dudley crowds into the Bethel Police Department's armory closet. Insufficient storage is just one of the reasons Dudley says the current police building is inadequate.

by Paul Basile

Times are tough for the Bethel Police Department. The force is once again faced with serious staffing problems and struggling to cope with a desperately inadequate police facility.

The current home of the Bethel Police Department began its life as a city jail over 30 years ago. As the police force grew over the years, the building grew too. What exists now looks like a patched-together jumble of flimsy looking boxes. What's inside is worse.

Police Chief Benjamin Dudley said that the building is far from adequate. There is no holding cell, interview room or sufficient meeting space.

"If we need to have a full department meeting, we have to call the Fire Department or use the City Hall to meet," said Dudley.

Dudley explained that these days, the investigators' office, which has no security system besides a lock on the door, doubles as the interview room.

"You can't leave someone alone in here," he said. "We should be able to

leave an individual in here and watch them through a double window or video monitor."

"I know this wouldn't meet any standards," said Dudley.

Storage is another problem for the Bethel Police Department; storage of anything. Current evidence is jammed into a small, unventilated, inadequately secured room. It is a loosely organized mess of booze bottles, firearms and boxes upon boxes. Evidence from serious crimes, such as any involving a death, must be stored indefinitely. Articles of evidence from unsolved crimes must be kept for ten years.

To accommodate the backlog of debris, the department employs two 20' connexes that provide no heat and only relative cover from the elements. Other supplies and files are scattered throughout the building. Nearly every room serves two or three purposes (i.e., the boiler room/communications center).

For an armory, the Bethel Police use a small closet with a rickety wooden door.

continued on page 21

Bethel PD in need of new home *from page 4*

"I could bust this open with my shoulder or a kick," said Dudley. "This is insufficient."

Besides the close quarters for firearms storage, there is no space designated for firearms repair or cleaning. Dudley said that currently Lieutenant Andre Achee's office doubles as the firearms repairs office.

Security is a major concern at the police building as well. Besides the derisory locks on the evidence room and armory closet, the main entrance to the department is only moderately secure. Dudley showed that again, a firm kick or shoulder-check could break through the press-code lock.

The dispatcher/receiving office seems secure behind a bulletproof window. But Dudley pointed out that inches to the right of the window is a very thin wall that a bullet could easily penetrate. This puts civilian employees at considerable risk.

"In other departments I've been to, you never see civilian employees," said Dudley.

Among the rest of the myriad of delinquencies at the Bethel Police Department building are its rotted drafty windows, its slanted floors, and the patched-over hole in the floor that is used for access to the building sewer system. Dudley said that officers and staff count on a miserable "stench" permeating from the floor sewage access 2 or 3 times a year. At those times, "you just don't come in this part of the building," said Dudley.

Improvements have been made to the building over the years. As recently as 2 years ago new boilers were installed. At this point, Dudley doesn't think improvements will do much good.

"In my opinion, that's just putting a band-aid on a bleeding artery," he said.

According to Dudley, the only answer

is a new public safety building, something that has been promised to the department before. Dudley said that in the years that he has been on the force, he has seen 3 or 4 designs for new police buildings. He even attended a groundbreaking ceremony. No construction followed.

But there is a new movement afoot.

Dudley and John Sargent, City Grant Development Manager, are campaigning hard for community support for the construction of a new public safety building. According to Sargent, the City of Bethel is undergoing a process of "sophistication."

After State revenue sharing funds disappeared in recent years, Alaskan municipalities are having to rethink the way they support and develop programs and infrastructure. Sargent said that the City has already invested in projects like a new police building by hiring a Grant Development Manager. And it is most likely grant money that will fund the construction of a new facility for the Bethel Police Department. Sargent said that he is currently researching different grant possibilities.

Dudley added that the state of the building does not help his recruitment woes. In the last several months, the department has lost 4 officers. Another will leave later this month.

After that departure, the force will be 7 officers-down. Dudley said that everyone is already working 12-hour shifts.

Applications have been slow coming in, said Dudley. Many applicants don't follow through when he contacts them or are quickly disqualified after a background check is conducted.

Dudley believes that a new facility could help recruitment.

"How can I show someone a picture of this building and say, 'come work here'?" asked Dudley. "I'm embarrassed."