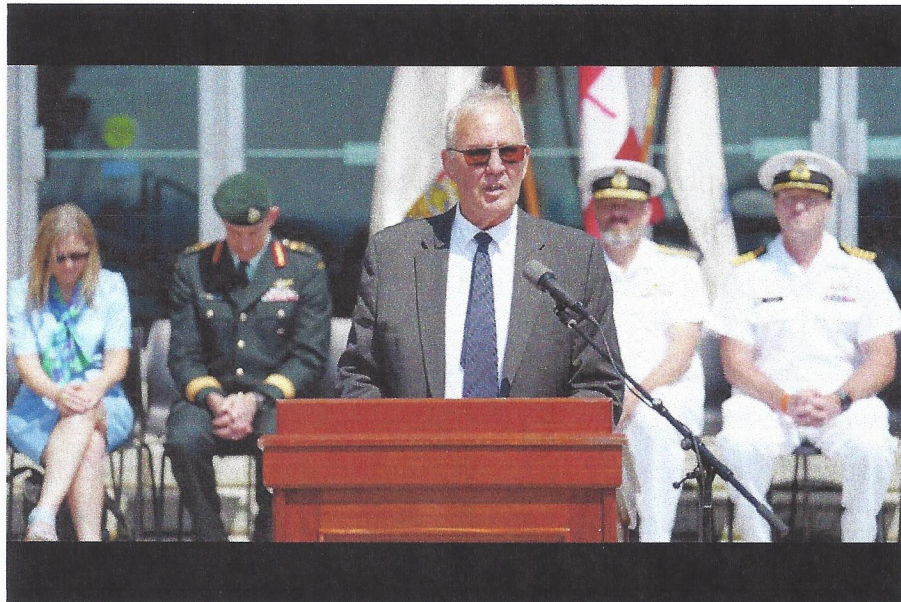


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Defence minister promises to 'unlock' DND lands for housing



[Darron Kloster](#)
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1 / 2 Minister of National Defence Bill Blair announces plans Wednesday for a new \$165-million, 480-room residential facility for junior non-commissioned officers in front of CFB Esquimalt's Nelles Block, which will be torn down to make way for the new housing. ADRIAN LAM, TIMES COLONIST

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National Defence Minister Bill Blair says the federal government is committed to “unlocking” underutilized lands for housing in Greater Victoria.

Blair was at CFB Esquimalt to announce a \$165-million, 480-room residential facility for junior non-commissioned officers, but said there is potential for more housing for both civilian and military personnel in the region on land owned by the Department of National Defence.

"We see there are many opportunities," said Blair, who was scheduled to meet with Victoria Mayor Marianne Alto and other municipal leaders later Wednesday to talk about surplus land for potential redevelopment.

"I've made a commitment that if there are properties that are surplus to our needs in the Canadian Armed Forces we will make those available for public use," said Blair.

"There's a great deal of our land in the defence portfolio that is underutilized and we believe there are real opportunities working with local municipalities, local developers, with our provincial partners to utilize that land more effectively and potentially build additional housing that benefits both members of the Canadian Armed Forces and the people that live in this community."

This year, the defence ministry announced it was working with Canada Lands Company and other partners to use 14 surplus properties for potential housing, mainly in Nova Scotia, Quebec and Ontario, as well as one property around an armoury in Vernon.

Blair said more will be identified.

It's estimated the Department of National Defence controls about 41 square kilometres of land in the capital region, including the sprawling base at Esquimalt and large swaths of training areas on the West Shore. Much of the military housing in Esquimalt also has potential to be denser, with small homes on large lots.

Blair was not specific about the amount of land or parcels in the region that could be targeted, but he said this year's federal budget made it clear the government is exploring redevelopment of DND properties to build more homes. The department owns 622 properties across Canada totalling 2.2 million hectares.

DND is facing a personnel crisis, as more than 16,000 positions are unfilled in branches of the Armed Forces. Blair said recruitment and retention challenges are linked to lack of housing.

"Many people are finding it challenging to serve because of [lack of] access to affordable housing close to where they work, so we've got to answer that requirement," said Blair. "We've got to respond appropriately. We also understand the urgency of working together quickly."

Blair said the new building on the site of the Nelles Building at CFB Esquimalt "is not the end of the story."

"I think this is the start of a strong indication of our unwavering commitment to build the housing that the Canadian Armed Forces members need and deserve."

CFB Esquimalt Base Commander Capt. Kevin Whiteside said the 709 military housing units on base properties are always fully occupied.

About 200 people are on the wait list for housing, he said, noting most are from other locations in Canada and have been posted in the capital region, but are currently looking for a house.

Others are spread out across the region in various types of housing and commute to the base, some from as far as over the Malahat.

CFB Esquimalt is considered the region's largest employer, with more than 6,000 military and civilian employees.

The design-build contract for the new residential facility that will be built on the site of the Nelles Block was awarded to Ellis Don Corp.

Construction is expected to begin in 2026, with completion projected for the early 2030s.

Built in 1952, Nelles Block will be torn down after the new project is finished.

As part of the tender application, about 5% of subcontracting for the new build must go to First Nations companies.

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