

Waterford

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The Telegram



Health Minister Ross Wiseman speaks with reporters about health-care facilities in the St. John's region at the Confederation Building Wednesday. — Photo by Keith Gosse/The Telegram

A 2005 consultant's report concluded that the Waterford hospital site needed \$35.6 million in "current requirements" to fix everything from leaky roofs to mouldy stairwells to crumbling masonry.

The consultant — Boston-based VFA Inc. — classed \$25.7 million of that Waterford work as "currently critical" or "potentially critical."

But Eastern Health officials said late Wednesday "very little" of the critical work has since been done.

In fact, they indicated the \$35.6 million figure has actually grown since 2005.

"There's no question it's higher today, because we haven't been able to make significant inroads into it," Keith Bowden, Eastern Health's director of infrastructure support, said Wednesday night.

The amount needed for critical or potentially-critical repairs across all Eastern Health facilities has ballooned to slightly more than \$100 million this year, Bowden said.

The board runs hospitals from Burin to Bonavista to St. John's.

In its 2007-08 budget submission to government, Eastern Health asked for \$93 million to deal with critical or near-critical repairs.

The board received \$3.6 million, according to Bowden.

Eastern Health tries to fix anything costing less than \$25,000 using its operating budget. For anything costing more than that, it asks for help from the province.

"We are driven by funding from government," Bowden said. "They give us what they can."

So-called "currently critical," or Priority 1 work "should be undertaken immediately including violations of life safety, building and electric codes," according to the VFA report.

VFA says "potentially critical," or Priority 2 work "should be corrected in the near future to maintain the integrity of the building, including systems that are not functioning properly or not operating and problems that if not addressed will cause additional deterioration."

The Waterford report identifies a time frame of one to two years for potentially-critical work. VFA concluded its work in September 2005, more than two years ago.

Eastern Health released the telephone-book-sized Waterford facility condition assessment report after Health Minister Ross Wiseman referenced its existence while speaking to news media Wednesday morning.

Wiseman summoned reporters to criticize a CBC story that suggested the province could close a hospital and shake up how it delivers services in the capital city.

The minister said it's too early to say what could happen with health services in St. John's. A planned review could take up to a year, Wiseman said.

"It is premature, inappropriate and inaccurate today to stand here and try to read something in, or try to speculate about what might or might not happen," Wiseman said.

Asked by a reporter about problems at the Waterford, the minister referenced its "facility report." He later backtracked, saying "there might be" such a report. But he declined comment on the Waterford situation, noting that he had not read it.

Wiseman later acknowledged Eastern Health had completed an evaluation of its facilities, including the Waterford.

Eastern Health is also making public VFA's 2005 assessments of its other three acute-care facilities in St. John's — the Health Sciences Complex, Miller Centre and St. Clare's — along with a second Waterford volume.

NDP Leader Lorraine Michael questioned why Wiseman did not appear to know for certain whether the reports existed, and why he didn't ask for updates.

"I'm absolutely overwhelmed by the number of things that need to be corrected, everything from wiring to fire exits to clothes dryers not vented to the outside," Michael said.

"It seems unbelievable that we could have a public health facility that would have some of these basic things not in good condition."

Earlier in the day, Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones questioned why the report had not been previously released to the public.

"If there are major infrastructure problems in our health care facilities, these concerns should be made public in a timely manner, especially if it will give direction to the possible restructuring of health services in the province's most populous region," Jones said in a statement.

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