

# Since when has Sarnia required a fortress in order to keep residents safe from crime?

*Heather Anne Wakeling Lister - April 2026*

Back and forth, comments are spit between elected officials. Legal litigation is threatened, made, then withdrawn. It all adds up to excruciating power plays, especially true where it concerns a proposed project that many deem unrealistic: the construction of a \$91 million police station.

Many have been made aware that the proposed headquarters budget is expected to exceed \$120 million, and that is before accrued interest. Criticism has been swift.

The only cost saving measure I noticed is the donation by city council of 4.7 hectares of land located southeast of Highway 40 and London Line.

An internet search offered data to suggest that based on recent projects and construction estimates in Sarnia and southwestern Ontario, the cost to build an apartment building has reached roughly \$160 to over \$250 per square foot.

Even with additional costs for multi-storey projects, a four-storey building generally costs \$156 to \$240 per square foot, a 24-unit affordable housing project in Sarnia was initially estimated to cost \$7 million, but due to delays, is now expected to reach between \$13.5 and \$14.5 million. Yet, another 40-unit project is cited as costing \$18 million. Far below \$91 million.

Aside from the exorbitant cost, since when has Sarnia required a fortress in order to keep residents safe? Compared with the above figures, certainly it is more affordable to renovate and clear out the mold, and establish smaller precincts in various locations throughout the city than the fortress model.

It is unfortunate, but mold issues are a common occurrence within sealed buildings constructed in the 70s and 80s, and that does have to be fixed. A reasonable ask would be for renovations to increase office and processing areas, add a few more holding cells, and, of course, mold removal, all can be done at the same time since walls are normally removed for new room configurations and upgraded wiring.

Our current police chief, Derek Davis, arrived in Sarnia from Halton Region in 2022. In February, he was able to secure an extension of his contract to year 2032, indicating that his vision and assertive stance toward creating a semi-military fortress isn't going away any time soon.

Perhaps he hasn't had the time to take a good look around the city, or heard the myriad comments made that this city is in desperate need of housing, addiction and mental health supports.

If he did, he would have noticed Sarnia's roads, and the need of asphalt repair throughout the city. While work has been done, the amount of repaving hasn't kept up with the infrastructure maintenance required -- and if not gotten on top of soon, it's anyone's guess as to where all that water will continue to seep into.

Raising residential taxes isn't an answer as household budgets are increasingly tight. Add in that three canary-in-the-cave indicators are blinking red--residential sale prices have considerably reduced, yet there is a reported glut of homes remaining on the market longer. Counter that knowledge with the increased usage of Sarnia's food banks and shelters, and the addition of more thrift stores. Each flag an indication that kitchen table budgets aren't balancing.

Outside of restricted personal finances, Sarnia's downtown is in need of funding support. Although several business owners have been trying to improve the overall look of the area, without financial infusion, the water's edge will remain underutilized as a welcoming public space. And that affects the city's ability to attract tourism dollars.

If drawing on Sarnia's available line of credit is a viable financial option, then fund what will reduce crime in the first place. Increase spending which will ensure employment in areas of infrastructure and repair, housing, community health initiatives, including free access to programs for children and home care for the infirm.

Unfortunately, city budgets now must add in the tragic consequences of addiction and related harm reduction initiatives. Necessary preventions that will take some pressure off the hospital's emergency department.

Sarnia could use some forward-thinking vision in the creation of free access, 'third places' where community can gather, as post COVID loneliness remains one of the more hidden lingering side effects.

At time of writing there are 23 vacant land opportunities within Sarnia. In particular there is a power of sale sign on 3 acres of land in the south end that, in my opinion could be bought by the city well below the previously listed \$2.5 million price tag.

Construction of a co-operative housing complex would not only offer a cost-efficient solution, but provide construction jobs. Once completed, the building of a cooperative housing neighbourhood, rather than subsidized complexes, aids working people by providing rental relief by basing rents on income, and offers housing stability. That's debt well spent.