

Popular tax help desk closes

By Bernice Pontanilla
Staff Reporter

The closure of the in-person help desk at the Winnipeg Taxation Centre in Transcona has left a local resident wondering where he will go the next time he has tax-related questions.

"Surely we are paying enough

(taxes) to have someone there," said East Kildonan resident Jack Crawley. "There was a real demand for it. I don't think it should be abused, but if we have difficulty or something and we get a letter saying your owe money and you don't know why, it should be there."

On Oct. 10, the Canada Revenue Agency shut down the in-person

help desk at the Stapon Road taxation centre just west of Kildonan Place mall - a place where Crawley often sought help, the last time two tax seasons ago.

Emilia Kotris, a spokesperson for the CRA, said the original decision to close the desk was made by a federal government expenditure committee several years ago.

"It's an expenditure saving (measure). There was a duplication of services," said Kotris. "Winnipeg was the only city in Canada other than Toronto that had two public inquiry counters."

The second counter on Broadway will remain open, but as of Nov. 6, visits will be by appointment only.

The Broadway office also has Internet kiosks and telephones available or people needing help filling out their tax forms.

Crawley said he believes the in-person counter at Stapon Road should remain open for seniors like himself who don't have access to the Internet and recent Canadian immigrants who would likely feel more comfortable explaining their situations with documents in front of them.

Crawley himself said he had a poor experience when he tried to call the help line and had to wait an entire morning for service.

Once he was able to speak to someone, he was told he needed to write a letter.

Instead he went down to the Stapon Road counter, had his situation resolved in less than five minutes and was told by an employee there that there was no need to write any letters.

Elmwood-Transcona MP Bill Blaikie said he tried hard to keep the Stapon Road help desk open, including writing several letters to the National Revenue ministry.

"I think it's particularly important for people who want personal service or people who want to sit down and talk to a real person," said Blaikie from his office in Ottawa.

"For a Crown corporation interested in better service, this is just the opposite...This may be more efficient for the CRA, but not for ordinary folk."

Blaikie said he has received complaints from many constituents and heard from the taxation centre's union, Local 50031 of the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

"We've certainly expressed our concerns to our employer and our members of Parliament," said Bruce Campbell, PSAC regional representative based in Winnipeg.

"It's more daunting for newly arrived Canadians and our elderly."

Kotris said the number to call to make an appointment at the Broadway office is 1-800-959-8281.

Those who would like to voice their concern over the closure of the Stapon Road help desk can write a letter to their local MP or the Minister of National Revenue.

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