Merchants back injection site

VCMA sends letter of support to PM Harper

Recognizing that fewer heroin addicts are shooting up outside their businesses, the Vancouver Chinatown Merchants Association (VCMA) is calling on Prime Minister Stephen Harper to keep North America’s only safe injection site open.

The Downtown Eastside facility is due to complete its trial run Sept. 12. Yesterday, a coalition called Insite For Community Safety (IFCS) emerged to convince the federal government that the site is saving lives and improving public health.

Among its supporters, the IFCS also counts Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan and Police Chief Jamie Graham.

When the facility opened three years ago, the VCMA opposed it. Now the association’s chair, Albert Fok, has written a letter of support to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. If the site is shut down, “drug users will be forced back onto the streets to administer their habits,” he wrote.

Apprentice locksmith Art Boissineau agreed that there are fewer people shooting up in public. He spends much of his time reinforcing doors in the neighbourhood.

“What I see out there is all crackheads,” said Boissineau. “You rarely see any injections going on.”

IFCS spokeswoman Gillian Maxwell said the site is also equipped with a ventilated room for smoking crack, but the room is not being used because it’s too politically sensitive.

There are fears that providing a safe place for heroin addicts to shoot up may also prove too politically sensitive for the new Conservative government. During the election, Harper cast doubt on continued funding. In May, he expressed his skepticism to Victoria Mayor Alan Lowe, who wants a site in his own city.

Health Canada is assessing the research before deciding whether the facility will stay open, said spokeswoman Carole Sandon.

Maxwell pointed out that more than 20 academic journals have published studies on the site, and the research has been overwhelmingly favourable.