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KING'S CORNER

Conservatives miss the point

It boggles the mind that Insite, the safe-injection site opened in the Downtown Eastside in 2003, could be shuttered for a lack of funds.

Yet it's a real possibility, with the federal government still not forthcoming on whether it will continue to pay its share of the site's bills.

The site's been a qualified success. Site clients now have a regular point of contact with health services, making it easier to get treatment when it's available.

HIV transmission is down; so are overdose deaths. Other cities have taken note; Victoria mayor Alan Lowe, no bleeding-heart, wants to see a similar facility established in his city.

More telling, though, is how many of the site's former opponents have changed their minds since the site opened.

Take George Chow, for example. Chow ran for council as an independent in 2002, on a platform unambiguously opposed to a safe-injection site.

Like other Chinatown figures, he worried it would encourage and entrench drug use in the neighbourhood.

He took more votes than any other independent.

After the site was up and running, with no explosion of use and better health outcomes, backed up by a gaggle of reports in peer-reviewed journals, Chow's view changed.

Vision Vancouver – the party of Larry Campbell – was able to woo Chow on side and on to council.

Same goes for longtime Chinatown Merchants' Association president Albert Fok, another Insite opponent turned supporter.

The Non-Partisan Asso-

ciation was bitterly divided over the site; now, you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone in the party who wants to see the site closed.

So with all those skeptics on board, why hasn't the federal government renewed its commitment?

Blame it on the Conservatives taking power.

There's at best a tenuous connection between the Vancouver and the new federal government. Vancouver hasn't given the Conservatives much support; instead, it comes from communities who either shovel their drug problems into the inner city or make like ostriches, pretending that they don't have a problem.

No votes from Vancouver means they barely hear our concerns. To compound the situation, the government's policy advisors come from almost anywhere but Vancouver.

Within the Conservative caucus, there are too many who would rather confront drug use by denouncing it as a moral failure rather than deal with it on a practical level.

Funding the safe site and "enabling" heroin use offends their sensibilities.

But this isn't about enabling drug use. It's already there, and it'll be with us whether the government renews the funds or not. It's a choice between going with an effective program that's saving lives, or being ideologically pure and pretending that drug use can be scolded out of existence – consequences be damned.

Vancouver's figured out what works. Will our new rural overlords in Ottawa pay attention?

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