

Mayors to discuss safe injection sites: Victoria and Vancouver could work together in face of Tory opposition

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Victoria may ask to "piggyback" off the success of Vancouver's safe injection site in order to one day get its own, says mayor Alan Lowe.

Just how the two cities can work together on safe injection and harm reduction strategies for drug users is one topic to be discussed by Lowe and Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan during a meeting today, said Lowe.

A united strategy may be the best way to deal with the federal Conservative government, he said. The Tories have indicated a reluctance to allow the sites, first approved when the Liberals were in power, where users can obtain clean equipment and inject drugs such as cocaine and heroin under medical supervision.

Vancouver's Insite facility in the city's downtown east side -- the first of its kind in North America -- is nearing the end of its three-year pilot project status this fall. Research suggests it has reduced the spread of disease and overdoses among the most at-risk users. However, public drug use remains a problem and became the focus of a police crackdown in February.

Victoria is still mulling over options for its own site to serve an injection drug population estimated at 1,500-2,000 users.

Lowe said it could be easiest to ask to join Vancouver's project renewal process, thereby making one application for safe injection sites in both Vancouver and Victoria.

"I may very well see if we can piggyback," Lowe said. Victoria has already based its harm reduction policies on Vancouver's four-pillars approach -- prevention, treatment, housing and enforcement. Safe injection falls under the treatment pillar.

During last year's municipal elections, Lowe promised to move forward on a safe injection site in 2006. "One can still hope," he said Sunday, adding the new federal government has altered timelines.

In Victoria, a feasibility study on the benefits of starting a safe injection site was recently finished by Richard Stanwick, Vancouver Island's Chief Medical Health Officer. It is now being reviewed by Vancouver Island Health Authority CEO Howard Waldner.

Lowe and Sullivan's meeting comes on the opening day of a global conference on drug harm reduction in Vancouver.

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