

**PM gives safe-injection site idea cool reception**

Times Colonist (Victoria)

Monday, May 29, 2006

Page: C2

Section: Capital & Van. Isl.

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Source: Times Colonist

Victoria's push to build safe injection drug sites has hit its biggest roadblock yet -- Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

During a private meeting with Harper Friday, Victoria Mayor Alan Lowe said he was told safe injection sites go against the beliefs of the Conservative government.

"I did ask [Harper] about what his direction is on safe injection sites, and he said that he was waiting for some more studies," said Lowe.

"He did say that looking at safe injection sites was almost against their philosophy and I guess the only hope that I got out of the discussion was it seemed like he was willing to listen to the research."

After a fact-finding trip to Europe last summer, Lowe has become a public champion of safe injection sites, advocating such facilities be tied in to smaller health centres as a way to help Victoria drug addicts.

The city has held open houses to discuss the issue, and Victoria police have indicated their support for the sites. Meanwhile, the Vancouver Island Health Authority has drafted a feasibility study to look at the medical benefits of safe injection.

There are currently only two legal safe injection sites in North America, both located in Vancouver. The most prominent is called InSite, in the downtown east side, where users are given clean equipment and supervised by medical staff as they inject drugs such as heroin or cocaine. Drug users are also offered counselling.

InSite received a three-year research exemption from federal drug laws by the previous Liberal government. But the exemption expires in September. At the same time, a final set of research is expected on the site's effectiveness.

Harper has told media he's "not committed" to extending the life of the project, but will look at the research.

Although Victoria had asked to partner with Vancouver on future safe injection projects, it is now clear Victoria has to set itself apart from a big city approach if it hopes to get its own smaller sites, said Lowe.

"I think if we went in with a proposal that is similar to Vancouver's we would be turned down," said Lowe. "It has to be something that's different and will give [the government] more data."

The Conservative government is "another hurdle to overcome" in efforts to help those battling drug addiction, said Lowe. And while Harper's reluctance to commit to the idea has dealt a blow to Victoria's plans, Lowe said he remains optimistic the city can "get its ducks in a row" on a proposal and continue to pressure Ottawa to change its mind.

Safe injection will be a discussion topic at an upcoming public conference on substance use in Victoria. Speakers at the first Voices of Substance conference include provincial health officials, police, Vancouver safe injection organizers, business leaders and former drug users. The conference runs June 2, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Ambrosia Catering and Event Centre, 638 Fisgard St.