

Braid: UCP could shut safe drug site but they'd rather blame city hall



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Both the province and city have mused about closing the safe consumption site at the Sheldon Chumir Centre. Jim Wells/Postmedia Network

Premier Danielle Smith's government is very clear about who rules the cities.

The UCP does. Every municipal council knows it.

Smith brought in a law prohibiting municipalities from dealing directly with Ottawa. The province can now fire elected councillors and cancel municipal bylaws.

The premier and her ministers halted city hall's Green Line LRT by withdrawing funding, then took over design of the truncated project.

That was a breathtaking intrusion into the long-standing right of cities to manage their own transit projects. The UCP didn't hesitate to jump in when the whole Green Line was in trouble.

For better or worse, Smith and her cabinet are the civic powerhouses across Alberta.

Then why, you might ask, does the province suddenly need city hall approval to shut down the Safeworks supervised drug consumption site at the Chumir urgent-care centre?

The simple answer is, they do not. This is an AHS facility, owned, staffed and operated by the province under the authority of Health Minister Adriana LaGrange and addictions sub-minister Dan Williams.

People can disagree about supervised drug use, but there's no question whatever about who's providing it, and who could stop it cold with one quick decision.

The concerted effort to draw city hall into the closure debate is entirely political.



Calgary Ward 13 Coun. Dan McLean outside council chambers on Wednesday, September 4, 2024. Gavin Young/Postmedia

Coun. Dan McLean, one of the conservative minority, welcomes council debate on closure. Williams says he needs city approval to wind up the site.

The mood around Safeworks has changed radically since the site opened in 2017. Always controversial, safe supply is now anathema to many voters.

Smith and her crew don't just want jurisdiction over the big cities. They crave political dominance after the civic elections a year from now.

The thought of progressive councillors stepping up to publicly back safe supply is very appealing. So is the prospect of voters thinking it's all council's fault.

Mayor Jyoti Gondek has tried valiantly, in the gust of claims and counter-claims, to point out that Smith could order this shut down anytime she likes.

The Chumir site has been a unique provincial mess since former Premier Rachel Notley's NDP imposed it on the Beltline.

Those were the days of AHS peak power, influence and occasional arrogance.

Backed by NDP conviction that safe supply was essential, they simply plunked the clinic in the worst possible location, right across from Central Memorial Park.

AHS did not want a visible police presence. That would scare away those with addictions, the theory went. It took many months for the city to marshal a police presence that should have been there from Day 1.

Jason Kenney, when he became UCP leader, made his dislike of safe supply clear. As premier he launched a review of sites. It returned opinions that were not just negative, but positively hostile.

In 2021, Kenney made a sensible announcement. Safeworks was to shut down. The service would shift to two sites with some recovery facilities.

Alpha House and the Drop-In Centre were mentioned. Talks apparently went on for many months.

But nothing came of the whole business. No new sites were developed. Safeworks is now in its seventh year, still supervising drug use.

For the UCP, this is one of the most serious policy failures in five years of government. They've tried to close Safeworks time after time with no result, and now strive ardently to shift blame to city hall.

For those who might still doubt who's really responsible, [the following about the Chumir facility is still on the AHS website:](#)

"Supervised Consumption Services are part of a range of evidence-based services that support prevention, harm reduction and treatment for Albertans living with substance use challenges."

Safeworks, the page adds, provides "a place where people can use drugs in a monitored, hygienic environment to reduce harm from substance use while offering additional services."

There it is — your provincial government at work.

Don Braid's column appears regularly in the Herald

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