

June 30, 2022

John Horgan
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Adrian Dix
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Sheila Malcolmson
Minister of Mental Health & Addictions
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Harwinder Sandhu
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Re: Decriminalization of drugs in B.C.

Premier Horgan, Minister Dix, Minister Malcolmson, Minister Farnworth, MLA Sandhu,

The Greater Vernon Chamber of Commerce wishes to provide input on the recent announcement that the Province of B.C. has been granted a three-year exemption under the federal Controlled Drugs and Substances Act to remove criminal penalties for people who possess a small amount of certain illicit substances for personal use. We understand this measure is being taken to address the overdose crisis. However, our Chamber has concerns about the policy direction, including:

- An exemption of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act will not reduce overdose deaths without a significant investment in services and supports for individuals with substance abuse disorders. Currently, support programs are over subscribed;
- Any provision of mental health and substance abuse services must be accessible and affordable for all residents in all parts of the province;

- Decriminalization is not connected to a safe drug supply, and the supply will remain toxic no matter the amount of drugs an individual possesses;
- Decriminalization could lead individuals, and particularly youth, to believe that using a small amount of drugs is safe as it has been sanctioned by the government through temporary decriminalization;
- Law enforcement will experience challenges as there will be contradictions in the regulations. Certain amounts of illicit drugs will be permitted but an individual can be arrested for open alcohol consumption;
- There could be increased open drug use in commercial areas such as downtown cores, as well as parks and other public spaces.

If existing harm reduction strategies are followed, allowing individuals to keep small amounts of drugs in their possession is contradictory. Consider that law enforcement does not permit an individual consuming alcohol in public to continue drinking. The alcohol is seized, and a fine is typically levied. Based on how authorities respond to a legal substance (alcohol) in a public setting, it is difficult to understand how an individual with illicit drugs would be allowed to possess illicit drugs and continue public use.

We are requesting that your government take the following actions:

- Immediately enhance services and supports for individuals with mental health and substance abuse challenges;
- Ensure access to such services is affordable and equitable across the province;
- Work with law enforcement agencies to reduce ambiguities in the law;
- Work with service providers, local government and business organizations to provide education on services and the regulations, and establish a communications process between business organizations, service providers and all levels of government on matters related to substance abuse and mental health.

Our Chamber is urging your government to take immediate action that not only supports individuals experiencing substance abuse addiction but strengthens all segments of our communities. We look forward to hearing from you on this important matter.

Regards,



Robin Cardew
President
Greater Vernon Chamber of Commerce

CC. City of Vernon Mayor and Council

District of Coldstream Mayor and Council

Regional District of North Okanagan Board of Directors

Okanagan Indian Band Chief and Council

BC Official Opposition

Service Providers

Vernon North Okanagan RCMP

Downtown Vernon Association

Okanagan-Shuswap Chambers of Commerce

Interior Health