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Portrayal of Pandora prompts response from politicians



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Structures on Pandora Avenue between Vancouver and Quadra streets last week. An estimated 20 people still live in an encampment on the 900-block of Pandora, although the number swells during the day. ADRIAN LAM, TIMES COLONIST

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Politicians and non-profit leaders responded this week to a national story pointing to Pandora Avenue in Victoria as one of the largest open-air drug markets in Western Canada.

The *Globe and Mail* feature on fentanyl — the opioid responsible for most drug deaths in B.C. — painted the 900-block of Pandora as stinking of urine and littered with trash, lined with semi-unconscious people and shuttered businesses, and so marked by violence and chaos that area condo owners can't sell their way out.

In response to that portrayal of the underbelly of postcard-perfect Victoria — twice voted Condé Nast's No. 1 small city in the world — B.C. Conservative Leader John Rustad in question period Monday demanded treatment-focused housing that "bans these deadly drugs and restores law and order to communities like Victoria."

B.C. Premier David Eby, in an unrelated news conference, pointed to significant new supportive-housing developments underway and the number of people already housed.

"We had 40 people living outside [on Pandora]. I think we're down to 19," he said, adding he's spoken with everyone from first responders to business owners and understands "the urgency around addressing this."

Julian Daly, CEO of Our Place Society, a non-profit that provides housing and supports to those in need, said the province has provided "a great deal of shelter and housing," but the highly addictive and toxic opioid fentanyl has resulted in a small group of people becoming so ill and brain-damaged from overdoses that they can't keep the housing or shelter they are given.

"To me, that means that this is primarily an issue around the drugs and the addiction, which is primarily a health crisis," said Daly.

Daly doesn't want to see the criminalization of drug use but said the laws prohibiting open drug use — which is chronic on Pandora Avenue — should be enforced, pointing to dealers acting with impunity on Pandora.

"The leverage that comes with forcing, enforcing or threatening to enforce the law is considerable and I think we could be doing more of that," he said. "If they felt there was going to be a pretty constant police presence, at least for a time, and that they might have the law enforced on them, I think some of those people would disappear."

Eby said involuntary care is part of the answer for some people "really struggling out in the community," adding the province is opening secure-care beds across B.C.

Daly agrees, saying there are people on the street "who are so unwell with their mental health and their addictions that they simply cannot make an informed decision."

He said he arrived at work two weeks ago to find the body of someone who had overdosed on the pavement. "If that person had been taken into involuntary care, they'd probably still be alive," he said,

adding he saw another youth lying prostrate on the ground.

“It’s so heartbreaking, just lying on the pavement comatose,” said Daly. “We’re kidding ourselves if we think that somehow they’re going to get the help they need [voluntarily].

“They’ll die with their civil liberties intact, but very little else.”

Daly said the *Globe* story highlighted the devastating physical and mental effects of fentanyl on individuals, but likely entrenched fears about Pandora Avenue.

“I’m not trying to diminish what’s happening there, but there is hope,” he said, pointing to those who have gone from Pandora Avenue to New Roads Therapeutic Recovery Community, a residential facility in View Royal where they can spend up to 24 months, and are turning their lives around.

“We have 500 people housed with us tonight and sheltered with us who were previously homeless and they have kept that housing, and that gives hope,” Daly said Monday. “And this time last year, there was probably 50 more people on Pandora living rough and homeless, and those people have been found a place to live, to shelter.”

Non-profits like Our Place, B.C. Housing, Island Health and police are working together to “do what I call the final push on Pandora to get the remaining people off Pandora to a better place,” said Daly.

The province recently opened 54 supportive housing units at Crosstown on Burnside Road East. This month, it also announced that construction is starting on an eight-storey, 90-unit staffed development at 726 Discovery St. to be completed in 2027, and a 21-storey building at 926/930 Pandora Ave. that will replace existing structures and include 158 lower-cost rental homes and 47 supportive homes.

Housing Minister Ravi Kahlon said in the legislature on Monday that after a paramedic was assaulted and first responders swarmed on Pandora Avenue last year, health, housing, local government and police officials and non-profits began meeting monthly to address the challenges.

By his ministry’s count, there were 100 people in the Pandora Avenue encampment last year, but since the province brought in more supportive housing and scaled up housing options, it’s down to about 19, although the number swells to about 40 during the day. “I appreciate the 19 people is still too many,” said Kahlon.

Daly also pegs the number of “absolutely homeless” on Pandora Avenue at about 20, while the City of Victoria’s numbers — via bylaw and police officers on the streets daily — suggest 33 structures and 50 to 60 people are still on the street.

Mayor Marianne Alto said the city is spending “enormous” amounts — nearly \$25 million over two years — on homeless supports and encampment repair costs as all municipalities are forced to make decisions “that

should properly be at the feet of the provincial government.”

“The ways that we can respond to those most vulnerable are systems and programs and resources and treatments and help that are well beyond the means of any single municipality,” said Alto, arguing a more comprehensive plan is needed by the province.

Alto anticipates with the release of its [Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan](#) next month, Pandora Avenue could be transformed in six months.

The city is looking at “how we can more comprehensively intervene in the root causes of some of these issues, so that we can, in the longer term, begin to mitigate our need for an emergency response.”

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