

Victoria Sex Stroll - Is it Appropriate?

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It's 'just not an appropriate place'

MLA's prostitute stroll idea dismays businessman who made \$266,000 in improvements to move to target area See also: [Police Tackle Prostitutes in Victoria](#)

Malcolm Curtis

Times Colonist

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The brick building at the corner of Store and Pembroke streets, o-nce a depot for Victoria's electric streetcars, seemed the ideal place for Andy Poirier's business.

But after investing \$266,000 in improvements to the 1913 building that he rents, Poirier was astonished to hear Victoria-Hillside MLA Sheila Orr suggesting that end of Store Street as a designated "stroll" or area for prostitutes to ply their sex trade.

In February, Poirier relocated Victoria Gymnastics to the airy barn where 1,100 children, from tots as young as two to teens, take instruction in the sport.

He was happy to get away from a site o-n Quesnel Street where prostitutes and drug users littered the area with used condoms and needles.

"We moved here to get away from that," he said Wednesday. "When I heard (Orr's comments) I just about died ... this is just not an appropriate place for that."

Poirer's response was just o-ne of many sparked by the MLA's musings earlier this week about a red-light district that caught national attention. Orr was looking for ways to deal with lingering prostitution problems in a light-industrial area of the Burnside-Gorge neighbourhood, though her ideas were promptly rejected by Mayor Alan Lowe and Premier Gordon Campbell.

An estimated 30 to 45 prostitutes -- many of them under 18 and most of them with drug addiction problems -- are soliciting in an area west of Government Street between Gorge Road and Bay Street in an area often referred to as Rock Bay.

Orr, who continued to defend her position Wednesday, said the prostitution is threatening to spill over into residential areas around Gorge Road, a neighbourhood that is part of her riding.

"I don't think we should be so closed minded as to say this isn't going to work," the MLA said.

People said the same sort of thing about supervised drug injection sites before o-ne was introduced to Vancouver, she said.

Al Melett, an owner of Poirier's building, which adjoins his Sports Traders store, said Orr seems to be unaware of the massive \$32-million cleanup of nearby industrial land around the bay -- in her own riding -- that local business people hope will kickstart revitalization of the area north of

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Chinatown.

"We're trying to upgrade the area," he said. B.C. Hydro and Transport Canada have begun to remediate 6.8 acres of waterfront land around Rock Bay.

Melett said the Rock Bay Ratepayers' Association, a group of business owners, is hoping the area to be cleaned up can become an entertainment and shopping district like Vancouver's Granville Island.

Orr acknowledged that Store Street may not be the best location for a "containerized stroll" for prostitutes. But another designated industrial area is worth considering, she said.

Poirier said the cleanup of Rock Bay has acted as a catalyst to begin changing the area, which has seen its share of social problems. A former B.C. Hydro building on Pembroke Street, once used as a soup kitchen and later as a hangout by drug users, has been spruced up for use by staff managing the project.

Poirier has already seen a drop in problems in the area, though he has invested plenty of money in lighting and security devices, including bars on all windows to deter break-ins. He plans to install video surveillance cameras to discourage lingering prostitution activity on Pembroke Street.

Women in the sex trade are living out of vans parked day and night on the north side of the street, Poirier said. And they're bringing customers solicited from nearby Government Street to the vans, he said.

Orr said the street-prostitution issue cannot be solved by simply chasing it from one neighbourhood to another. "Let's be honest -- it's a problem that's never going to go away."

Coun. Dean Fortin said attempts to legitimize street prostitution in areas of Vancouver in the 1980s failed.

"Soon after the pimps moved in and the crime moved in," he said.

The provincial and federal governments need to provide more social services to help get people out of the sex trade and to deal with associated drug issues, he said.

However, several councillors and social agency representatives praised Orr for having the courage to talk about the issue.

"I give Sheila Orr a round of applause for getting people to talk about this," said Jody Paterson, executive director of Prostitutes Empowerment Education Resource Society (PEERS).

Paterson said the debate has focused attention on the need to tackle the drug-addiction problem faced by most street prostitutes.

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Walk-in clinics are needed to treat these women, stuck in a vicious circle of depending on the sex trade to pay for drugs they are hooked on, she said.

PEERS is mounting a campaign to raise money to buy a recreational vehicle to provide a mobile clinic, Paterson said. The goal is to have it staffed by counsellors on a daily basis, she said.

This would expand a program that sees PEERS staff hand out clean needles and advice to prostitutes three nights a week, Paterson said. The society's research shows street prostitutes make up about 10 per cent of the sex trade, with the rest offering services through escort agencies that are tolerated if not condoned.

Of these, ages range from underage teens to one woman in her 60s, with at least one mother and daughter working the streets, Paterson said.

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