

# Health minister mingles with junkies

**SAFE-INJECTION SITE:** 'Very attentive' Clement makes first visit to controversial facility

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Canada's health minister mingled with injection-drug users shooting up yesterday as he made his first visit to a safe-injection site.

Tony Clement, accused by critics of having a hidden agenda against such facilities, spent about 30 minutes touring Insite in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside during his surprise visit to North America's only such operation.

While reporters waited outside, Clement strolled through Insite's waiting room, injection room and lounge, chatting with users and staff.

"I had a good chat with the staff there, understood some of their procedures, asked a lot of questions, got a lot of answers," Clement said afterwards.

Chris Buchner, HIV/AIDS and harm-reduction manager with Vancouver Coastal Health, said clients were using drugs during Clement's visit.

As an Ontario health minister under former premier Mike Harris, Clement was a tough critic of safe-injection sites, vowing to keep them out of that province, preferring anti-drug education, treatment and rehab for addicts.

Since entering federal politics, Clement has been accused of being equally skeptical.

He declined yesterday to say whether the tour had any impact on his views.

Insite, which opened in 2003, faced the prospect of closure last fall as



Health Minister Tony Clement stands outside Insite in the Downtown Eastside yesterday. It was the first visit for the minister who has been widely criticized for being against safe-injection facilities. GERRY KAHRMANN — THE PROVINCE

Clement tried to decide whether to renew an exemption that allows the use of illegal drugs inside.

He eventually decided to allow Insite to operate through the end of this year, awaiting studies that will help him decide on its long-

term fate.

Clement began his tour about 30 minutes after Insite opened for the day at 10 a.m.

"A couple of the clients recognized him," said Buchner. "[They] were very interested in telling him how

important this place was to them."

Buchner described Clement as "very interested, very attentive."

Dean Wilson, a Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users board member, chatted with Clement for several minutes.

"I just wanted to tell him that we never promised that [Insite] would stop crime," said Wilson.

Clement also visited a nearby Salvation Army detox centre and homeless shelter.

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## Ski resort gets facelift, thanks to businessman

**HEMLOCK VALLEY:**  
Exclusive homes, resort village to follow reopening

For more years than manager John Ens cares to remember, Hemlock Valley Ski Resort has been known as "The Little Mountain That Should, But Couldn't."

Despite having the potential for years to develop into a premier ski location, the Fraser Valley resort has always struggled and twice fell into receivership.

In fact, the last receivership and a particularly poor winter in 2003 caused the resort to close operations for the past three years.

But now it's back in business and Ens, who has worked at the resort for 20 years, is confident that Hem-



**Brian Lewis**

THE FRASER VALLEY

lock's happy days are as near as the next mogul.

The reason for his new-found optimism is a 63-year-old businessman from the flat lands of Langley who until last fall had many business successes in his life — but running a ski resort wasn't one of them.

On Oct. 19, Ralph Berezan successfully bid to acquire Hemlock Valley's lease from the B.C. govern-

ment and the receiver for \$3 million after the previous owner simply ran short of the funds.

Like luxury yachts, only more so, ski resorts are humongous holes into which rich folks pour lots of money. And it usually takes a long time before those dollars earn a return.

Berezan knows this, of course, because he made his millions in real estate and the hospitality industry by identifying and seizing opportunities that others missed.

In Hemlock Valley, he saw a ski resort ideally located next to the Fraser Valley — which is one of Canada's fastest-growing regions — and metropolitan Vancouver, which will host the 2010 Winter Games and draw global attention to all regional ski resorts.

But the real jewel lies beyond the Crown-owned ski area that Berezan

has leased. Surrounding the lifts, day lodge and ski runs is ample deeded property which he intends to develop as single and multiplex homes, condos and a resort village.

"We're the only ski resort outside of Whistler in this region where people can buy clear-title property and build a ski-in, ski-out home," he says.

Ens agrees that in addition to Hemlock's strategic location — it's also close to golf, salmon fishing and Harrison Hot Springs — its real-estate potential is significant. But until now, the missing ingredient has been someone like Berezan. That is, someone with ideas, business skills, patience — and ski pants with deep pockets.

"I'm here for the long haul," Berezan says. He plans to add new chairlifts this coming summer and in 2008, as initial steps in the mountain's rebuilding plan.

But for this season, just getting Hemlock ready for its opening Dec. 15 was a major accomplishment. Ens and his staff had just two months to hire staff and return idled lifts back to operational and regulatory-approved levels.

"Numerous power outages from fierce winter storms only added to the challenge," Ens says.

The three-person chair should open this weekend, which will give Hemlock three chairs and a rope tow serving 36 runs.

Following full-time Christmas hours through this week, Hemlock will operate Thursday through Sunday until the spring.

*If you have a story idea or noteworthy item about anything going on in the Fraser Valley, you can e-mail Brian at [blewis@png.canwest.com](mailto:blewis@png.canwest.com)*