

Eby says coordinated effort the key to curbing retail theft, downtown social issues

By **Brendan Pawliw**

Monday, Jan. 15th, 2024



BC Premier David Eby speaks at a news conference on Monday about wildfires in the interior. (Youtube/BC Government)

On the eve of speaking to a sold-out crowd at the BC Natural Resources Forum, Premier David Eby says he welcomes organizations such as Save our Streets who are trying to put a dent into retail theft.

The organization, which has grown to 60 members in roughly three months includes Downtown PG as well as other northern groups located in Quesnel, Fort St. John, and Dawson Creek.

They are calling on Victoria to crack down on theft, property crime, and street violence.

In an interview with Vista Radio, Eby says this is an issue we are seeing across Canada and into the United States where there are organized shoplifting rings, a new style of organized crime, we haven't seen before.

"On some occasions that escalates to violence and it's been a remarkable trend post-pandemic. For our part in BC, I have been meeting with individual members of the coalition – the retail members to talk about concerns that they are facing as well as BIA's across the province to be able to address this in a real coordinated way for our province."

"This is a big and complex issue that we are seeing all over the place and our province is taking a leadership approach in addressing it. I am grateful we have the coalition there to keep the pressure on."

"I think it is going to take a private business-government working together as well as the non-profit sector to be able to address these issues such as mental health and addictions that are driving a lot of these problems," added Eby.

The topic of violent offenders has also come up to begin the New Year where new legislation by Ottawa will make it tougher for repeat violent offenders gaining bail.

Federal laws that went into effect last week now place the onus on the accused to prove why they should be released.

The stricter measures are aimed at those accused of serious firearms and weapons offenses, as well as allegations of intimate partner violence.

"The federal government took a couple of legislative sessions to get there, unfortunately. But ultimately, the pressure of groups such as Save Our Streets as well as our government's work resulted in these changes. We should start to

see some benefits from that change in the law and courts having the tools that they need to keep people who are making communities unsafe behind bars as they wait for trial is a significant change,” said Eby.

In addition, the province introduced a new law in the last legislative session where people are not able to use hard drugs in business doorways and bus stops as well as parks, giving police the authority to regulate it.

However, Eby noted an interim ruling from the BC Supreme Court stating the province is not able to regulate hard drugs the same way as alcohol or tobacco products did raise a few eyebrows.

“Which is an incredibly concerning and surprising decision from the court. We are on the same page, the community needs to be safe for people, and business doorways need to be safe and that is why we are putting significant resources into prolific offenders – making sure people who are committing multiple crimes are tracked across the province. We have 90 people who are in that tracking system right now.”

In April of 2023, [Prince George and Terrace](#) were selected among a dozen hubs across BC targeting repeat violent offenders.

It’s part of the Repeat Violent Offending Intervention Initiative announced by the provincial government, which will include police, prosecutors, and probation officers.

The hubs will work with local stakeholders and other existing programs, such as situation tables and Assertive Community Treatment teams, through information sharing.

In addition, the initiative was supported by the new Special Investigation and Targeted Enforcement Program, which will see a 16-million dollar investment so law enforcement can bulk up targeted investigations of repeat violent offenders cases.

Another topic of interest for northern residents is harm reduction and why municipalities like Prince George and Quesnel are paying for it after it was an idea struck by the provincial government.

Taxpayers in Quesnel are footing the bill for roughly \$75,000 a year in this area while Northern Health shells out 100-grand.

Eby is grateful for the support municipal governments have shown but agrees his government needs to be the one to be the primary funder for this.

“Our government is providing more than \$100 million in various medical initiatives to respond to people, which is just as important and I would argue in some cases more important, a billion dollars (invested) in the last budget on treatment. Keeping people alive is one piece but we need to increase those treatment beds and that will be one of the topics we will be discussing when we are up in Prince George.”

Eby has a full slate planned for his first day in the northern capital tomorrow (Tuesday). At 10:30 AM he will be speaking at an event with Chief Dolleen Logan at UNBC regarding support for mental-health services for children and youth in our city.

Three hours later, he will be part of a star-studded announcement about a hydrogen project that will create good jobs and lower emissions in our area. That will take place at the Chemtrade Building at 2711 Pulp Mill Road.

MyPGNow will also be speaking with Eby before his address during a sold-out banquet dinner at 6pm.