

## DTES

# Citizen Sam missing the point

In *Citizen Sam*, the biopic about our beleaguered mayor, the viewer is dealt a veritable cornucopia of snippets of Sam the man and his notable life.

It's tough not to be moved by the story of an otherwise happy-go-lucky young man from a good family, who breaks his back skiing, slips into the depths of depression and suicide contemplation, only to remerge

phoenix-like from the ashes of his then torn world, to lead Canada's third largest city in charity, business and politics.

His rise to the coveted throne of Vancouver's political elite, then, is that much more remarkable.

And it's for the potential lift of every one of those seemingly superhuman qualities, too, that Sam Sullivan, the mayor, is such a surprising disappointment as being, at least, guardian of the shattered on the Downtown Eastside – the chief promise he'd made repeatedly during the civic campaign.

You'd expect someone who has stood at the precipice separating life and death to understand what it would be like

for the downtrodden in this city, who we can all agree, peer longingly, even playfully, over life's edge every day.

If the mayor really wanted his "Civil City" plan to charge against "the

problem" and not "the symptoms," rather than locking up garbage bins and going quixotically hard against those with the absence of anything but a gently wafting pillow of crack smoke, he should have started with an innovative, truly compassionate approach that would have parked him and a multi-partisan lobby group at the doorsteps of the Legislature and Parliament – with a strategy.

Instead, the mayor and his apparatus have decided to criminalize those who have nothing else in life but to miserably revel in the symptoms that are a blight on this city. Throwing up a weak, disjointed plan of competing philosophies that rings hollow in its prognosis does absolutely nothing.

I worked on the DTES for many years. One of the businesses I was responsible for bordered what is known in the patois of that street as "Shooter's Alley."

There, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, are life's wounded, filling their veins with the perpetually uneasy warmth of hell. The first few times I



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watched someone shoot up, I wasn't as much shocked as I was taken aback by their purposeful gait straight into the black of existence.

There I was standing behind a barred, heavily fortified gate, briefcase at my feet and there they were, all of them, flailing about in their own cesspool, only to drown one day: Used condoms,

dirty needles, blood-soaked foam and dead rats. They were clearly medicating.

"Who in their right mind would want to live like this," I once muttered to myself. And then it occurred to me: It wasn't that they were merely homeless or drug-addicted. It was clear that they were mentally ill. The social workers I befriended and that have worked that beat since time immemorial confirmed it: Attack the mental-health issue head-on.

And that is the real story of the DTES as it stands.

Yes Sam, garbage from homelessness and drug-addiction makes mental-illness issues worse. But so does ignorance from bad governments and ineffective leaders.

