

Northwest Portland neighbors frustrated after needle bill dies

By [Pete Ferryman](#)

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PORTLAND Ore. (KPTV) - Earlier in February, Senate Democrats in Salem announced that a bill to ban the distribution of needles and pipes in school zones would not advance this year.

They cited several reasons for killing the bill, but neighbors and parents in Northwest Portland say they're not buying it.

Community members also say the lawmaker who's supposed to represent them in Salem has just done the opposite.

Outside Cathedral School in Northwest Portland, there is a strong sense of frustration and betrayal among neighbors, business owners and parents.

They insist the one person elected to represent their interests is failing to protect their interests.

"If she's not listening to her constituents when it comes to something as so very basic as keeping needles out of school zones, then what are we doing here?" said Michelle Milla, a concerned neighbor.

"It's frustrating. At what point do kid's lives and their exposure to this matter?" said Jodi, a concerned parent.

"I gotta bite my tongue right now, because I'm just, I'm so upset at what she did to us," said Karen Chirre, a neighborhood business owner.

That lawmaker is State Senator Lisa Reynolds, D-Portland, who shocked the neighbors last week by killing a bill that would have banned harm reduction organizations from giving away free needles and pipes within 2000 feet of schools and daycares.

[Senate Bill 1573](#) resulted from a years-long campaign to stop the practice

A [previous FOX 12 investigation](#) prompted Multnomah County District Attorney Nathan Vasquez to convince the outreach workers to move from one location.

And while the difference there has been dramatic ever since, the neighbors say these groups will now be free to continue giving away needles and pipes to drug users wherever and whenever they want statewide, despite an overwhelming majority of constituents who supported a ban in school zones.

They say, in the end, they were largely shut out of the process.

"We were denied the opportunity in the hearing to speak unless you were in person," Milla said. "We had people on the horn who wanted to participate in that process, and she closed it off. And that's what was really frustrating. It didn't feel like Senator Reynolds worked with us. It mostly felt like we were ignored for a year and a half."

Now, they say, they just want answers.

"Why did you kill the bill? Why did you kill it? Because she did kill it," said Dave Gray, a concerned neighbor.

FOX 12 also wanted answers, but our multiple requests for an interview were ignored. So, we decided to go straight to the capitol to get a response.

We continued to try to find her, eventually waiting for her outside the Senate Majority office.

But she never did come out, exiting through a rear door instead.

Later, after noticing FOX 12 had been in the chamber, the Senate Majority leadership team called the newsroom. And while no interview was arranged, they did have Senator Reynolds' office send a statement:

"Needles showing up on our streets is of grave concern to me as an inner westside resident and as someone who meets regularly with concerned neighbors and community leaders.

"When SB 1573 was introduced, I agreed with the goal but disagreed with the penalty. I worked on an amendment that was not accepted by the bill's supporters and chief sponsor."

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"This last week... that's the most deeply disappointed I've been in a while," Senator Drazan said.

Drazan says Reynolds wouldn't agree to any penalty or enforcement element in the bill, which she says would have effectively turned the law into a mere suggestion.

FOX 12 also received a news release from the Oregon Coalition of Local Health Officials trying to justify the killing of the bill. In the headline, it claims a "landmark ruling in Washington state... proves decisive for the Oregon bill."

But FOX 12 obtained an email from the non-partisan Legislative Counsel in the Capitol, sent, by request, to the lawmakers working on the bill.

They reached a much different conclusion on the matter in Washington, stating "You asked whether the court order... is precedential. The answer is no."

The email goes on to say "this particular lawsuit will never result in legal precedent that would be binding in Oregon courts."

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Meanwhile, Reynolds says she is determined to get a new piece of legislation passed in 2027, but the neighbors in Northwest Portland say they're now skeptical.

"I have a feeling she's got some lobbyists and some NGOs that she's got... I mean, obviously she's up for re-election," Chirre said.

And while the political back and forth continue so could drug use in school zones across the state.

A practice, these neighbors say, defies common sense.

"We're not saying no to harm reduction, we're just saying put it in a place where it can help them, and it doesn't expose children," Jodi said. "It's really as simple as that. Just don't put it next to kids."

One neighbor did tell FOX 12 that Reynolds promised her to meet in April to discuss a new bill to be considered next year.

But until a new bill passes, Oregon lawmakers will have done nothing to stop free needles and pipes from being distributed in front of schools.