

'He's getting great press, he's back in demand, and he gets to thrust his nose at the United States of America.'

Timothy Ryan, Springfield city councilor



PHOTO BY CHRIS WATSON FOR THE GLOBE

Richard Altabe says importing drugs from Canada will help lower his eventual successor's ballooned budget.

Exit laughing

Springfield's lame-duck mayor relishes his FDA feud

By Christopher Rowland

IN THE CITY

Television lights for two national networks flickered on and faces microphones swayed in his direction as Mayor Richard Altabe of Springfield straddled into a state house hearing room and struck a defiant pose in his battle over Canadian drugs with the Food and Drug Administration.

"We are going forward, despite the opposition of the FDA," Altabe declared last week, as he told a group of world-watching and nation-officials about Springfield's groundbreaking program to import prescription drugs from Canada for city employees.

A lame-duck mayor with just three months left in office, Altabe has seized the national spotlight on the drug issue with an all-consuming gusto. In the process, Altabe, a former FBI investigator in 2004 and 2005, appears to be enjoying at least as much the company of the federal government.

"It's bringing a lot of fun with it," said Springfield City Councilor Timothy Ryan, a frequent opponent in budget and policy battles with Altabe. Charles V. Ryan, Jr. is running to succeed Altabe. "He's getting great press, he's back

in demand, and he gets to thrust his nose at the United States of America."

Altabe, 60, denies that an element of payback has contributed to the spotlight this way. After all, the FDA, which probed his relations with alleged organized crime figures, has nothing to do with the FDA. He launched his drug program in July, he said, strictly as a money-saving measure, not realizing it would generate so much attention. But Altabe does concede that he is suddenly having a ball as he prepares to step aside after eight years leading a tough, sometimes troubled city.

"It's been enjoyable," he said. "It's bigger than I ever imagined. Much bigger."

As leading advocate for the importation of Canadian drugs, Altabe was embraced by members of Congress from both sides of the aisle, including US Representative Richard Neal, the Springfield Democrat, during a recent trip to Washington. The national news media have been swarming around Springfield. Altabe told his own story about ordering prescription drugs for his son, Mike, a 16-year-old, in *The Washington Post*. He has given interviews to CNN, CNBC, National Public Radio, and newspapers