

Bowdens

The Calgary Herald (Calgary, AB)		Order/Commande
		60363
Date 11.07.2006	Circ. 112128 Page D1	1 / 2

FORT McMURRAY

Mayor pleads for help with oilsands boom

BOB WEBER
THE CANADIAN PRESS
FORT McMURRAY

Melissa Blake is quite possibly the only leader in Canada who says there may be too much growth in her community.

Blake, the mayor of the Wood Buffalo municipality at the heart of Alberta's exploding oilsands development, said Monday the provincial government and the energy industry must start paying to mitigate the impact in the Fort McMurray area or consider putting on the brakes.

"They need to have a broader perspective when they're going into their deliberations in support or non-support of particular projects," she said.

Monday was the first chance for lawyers representing Wood Buffalo to appear before a regulatory board that will rule on the latest proposal for Alberta's lucrative oilsands — Suncor's \$7-billion Voyageur project. But even as they made their arguments, Blake said in an interview that Fort McMurray is already "financially unsustainable."

The population has more than doubled to nearly 75,000 in nine years, and the prospect of another

\$100 billion in oilsands development over the next decade means the city just can't keep up.

"To ask us to take on \$400-\$500 million more in financial projects with our revenues — I couldn't even tell you how many times over we'd have to increase the taxes," Blake said.

Wood Buffalo's submission to the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board said Voyageur would only add oil to the fire.

"Despite acknowledging that proceeding with the project as proposed will contribute to the existing problems, Suncor does not offer any adequate or tangible solutions . . . The applicant must be part of the solution to the socio-economic problems created or exacerbated by the project."

The submission points out that "Fort Mac" already has a shortfall of nearly 3,000 homes, 17 police officers and two public schools. Its assault rate is nearly

twice the provincial average; its drug offences are triple.

Population continues to grow at about 10 per cent a year. A five-minute drive up Franklin Avenue yielded licence plates from eight provinces.

The city needs a new water treatment plant, police station, recreation centre and fire hall. One report estimates the area will need \$1.2 billion in infrastructure to accommodate growth — costs that continually inflate because of the overheated economy that makes them necessary in the first place.

Blake said time is growing short for someone to step up to the plate with a solution.

SEE OILSANDS, PAGE D7

FROM D1

OILSANDS: At what cost?

"If it takes three weeks (the length of the hearings), that's great," the mayor said. "If it takes three months, that's OK, too. What it can't take is three years."

Extra funding from industry may have to be part of the answer, she suggested.

"I think that there is probably an element of that that may come into it."

The pace of oilsands development is also speeding ahead of Alberta's ability to compensate for the environmental destruction it causes, said Chris Severson-Baker of the Pembina Institute, which also appeared before the hearing Monday.

Land is being chewed up by oilsands mining faster than it can be reclaimed





The Calgary Herald (Calgary, AB)

Order/Commande

60363

Date 11.07.2006

Circ. 112128 Page D1

2 / 2

or compensated for by the creation of protected areas, he said.

"The pace of development is something that has to be put on the table.

"Even if there is . . . enhanced reclamation going on, there's a point at which the boreal forest can't tolerate that amount of impact that quickly."

Although reclamation is ongoing, Severson-Baker points out that after 30 years of oilsands mining, no land has been declared fully restored.

"There's been no evidence of a company being able to restore boreal forest after it's been mined."

The municipality and the institute are only two of the recent voices calling for oilsands development to be slowed.

The area's health region has made similar requests, as have local aboriginal groups. Last week, former premier and Alberta icon Peter Lougheed

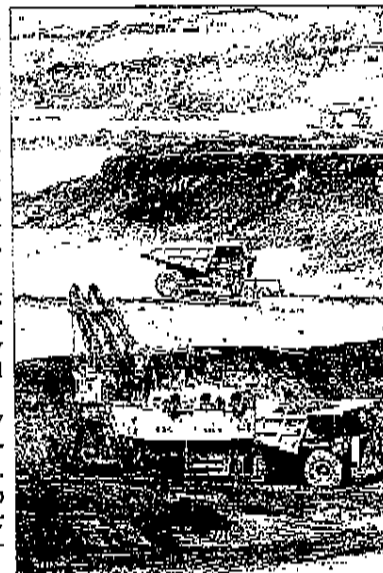
joined the call.

But Suncor spokeswoman Darcie Park said delaying or stopping oilsands projects won't necessarily solve the problems.

"There will be fewer taxes and royalties available for the funding of vital infrastructure," she said. "It would be harder for companies to invest in environmental innovations and technologies."

Park said Suncor is cautious about demands that it directly fund municipal infrastructure, even if it's partly their employees causing the increased demand.

"Industry should do what industry does best, which is to work to responsibly develop the resource," she said. "Governments should do what they do best, which is to identify needs for public funding and provide the funding."



Calgary Herald Archive

No company has been able to restore boreal forest after mining it, a spokesman for the Pembina Institute told a hearing Monday.



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WOOD BUFFALO
MAYOR
MELISSA BLAKE



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The Calgary Herald (Calgary, AB)		Order/Commande
		60363
Date 11.07.2006	Circ. 112128 Page A1	1 / 2

Tories boost school funding

Critics label 'extra \$180M Band-Aid' fix

JASON FEKETE
CALGARY HERALD

Facing growing demands to fix crumbling schools, the Klein government has announced \$180 million in new education funding — including \$119 million to alleviate maintenance woes — but the injection is being called “not nearly enough” by school boards and opposition parties.

Fresh from the province's announcement of an \$8.7-billion surplus for the last fiscal year, Education Minister Gene Zwozdesky unveiled the new cash Monday in Calgary, including \$61 million for operational funding, on top of the \$119 million to repair schools.

“This will help move along some projects that we know are necessary in order to con-

tinue having excellent school facilities throughout the province,” Zwozdesky said at the McDougall Centre after meeting with the Tory caucus for several hours.

“The monies will be spread out across the province where the highest needs exist, and we are abundantly aware that includes Calgary.”

It remains uncertain how much money is coming Calgary's way, as a list of specific projects receiving funding won't be released until Zwozdesky is able to speak with the school boards.

SEE SCHOOLS, PAGE A7

FROM A1 SCHOOLS: 'Won't take care of our problems'

Calgary's public and Catholic boards are saddled with a maintenance backlog totalling more than \$300 million, including \$425 million for the Calgary Board of Education.

Calgary board trustee Pat Cochrane said she's “pleased” to receive any new dollars, but added the newly announced funding won't be nearly enough. “We'll apply it to where it's most needed, but we need more and we need a long-term plan,” Cochrane told reporters. “It won't take care of our problems.”

The \$119 million has been earmarked for major replacement repairs, such as boilers, roofs, floors and windows, Zwozdesky said. Combined with \$81 million already announced, a total of \$200 million





The Calgary Herald (Calgary, AB)		Order/Commande 60363
Date 11.07.2006	Circ. 112128 Page A1	2 / 2

will be spent this fiscal year on major fixes across Alberta.

The \$61 million in operational funding will go to classroom instructional supports, including:

- \$28 million for meeting class-size initiatives;
- \$16.5 million for base instruction grants (per-student grants);
- \$9 million for general day-to-day maintenance, such as lighting, heating and custodial staff;
- \$5 million for severely disabled students; and

■ \$2.5 million for English as a second language instruction.

Zwozdesky said the total funding package will ensure "we continue to have the best-funded education system anywhere in Canada."

But the problems are mounting. The Calgary Board of Education is eyeing a \$32-million rebuild and facelift at Western Canada High School, while Marlborough Elementary — closed this year amid fears its roof could collapse — will undergo \$2.3 million in repairs. In

total, there are 50 public schools in Calgary that need extensive work on their roofs, Cochrane said.

Last month, Zwozdesky was even broadsided by one of his Tory colleagues over the state of Alberta's schools.

Dave Hancock, who is seeking to replace Premier Ralph Klein as leader of the provincial Tories, criticized the education minister for failing to come up with more money for the province's schools.

On Monday, the opposition

Liberals welcomed the unexpected \$61 million for operational funding, saying "it will help a lot." However, Deputy Leader Dave Taylor assailed the maintenance dollars as "not nearly enough."

"This continues to be Band-Aid funding," Taylor said. "It's a drop in the bucket."

Zwozdesky said a three-year maintenance funding plan likely will be unveiled in the fall.

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The Calgary Herald (Calgary, AB)		Order/Commande
		60363
Date 11.07.2006	Circ. 112128 Page A3	1 / 2

Made in CHINA
Second in a series

Chinese flock to English schools

AILEEN McCABE
CANWEST NEWS SERVICE
BEIJING

High up in a faceless skyscraper in one of the endless suburbs of the Chinese capital, a patient Alexei Berteig gives his spiel.

"The No. 1 best way to learn English? Go to Canada. Go to England. Go to Australia."

It's the best advice he can give, the young filmmaker from Saskatoon says before switching to fluent Mandarin to cajole his 60 or so students to abandon the back rows and move closer to the blackboard.

The bearded Berteig is one of an ever-increasing army of expats teaching English on a part-time basis to a Chinese population hungry to tap into the opportunities available to anyone who masters the language of Shakespeare.

Currently, an estimated 300 million Chinese are working on their ABCs — that's roughly equal to the population of the United States.

In his 2½ years in China, Berteig says, 20,000 students have sat in his classes, trying to polish their English skills.

They are boning up for state English-language exams, doing a crash course before studying abroad or just hoping to move ahead in a job where English is an asset.

Public servants and government officials are flocking to language schools in response to government encouragement to improve their English skills.

More and more students are also looking ahead to the Olympics in Beijing in 2008 and the World Expo in Shanghai in 2010, and hoping to learn enough English to land a job at one or both, according to Zhou Chenggang, senior vice-president of the New Oriental School, the largest English-language training group in China with 20 branches in Beijing alone.

"Right now we have 800,000 students, kids and adults studying spoken and written English and prepping for tests," Zhou boasts from his impressive corporate office overlooking the city.

In China, children start learning English in primary school as part of the regular curriculum, but much like many Canadians who study French in school, not a lot seems to stick.

You cannot get into a taxi in Beijing and expect the driver to understand an English address. Even to go somewhere as basic as the airport you need to give him an address written in Chinese. Nor can you necessarily order a meal in English and get anything close to what you want.

Only in the city's famous Silk

Street market will you hear a cacophony of English spoken, but even that is deceptive.

The merchants quickly run out of patter once they have made their pitch. "Hello lady, want Armani jeans?"

But Zhou insists that is changing among young people who are becoming much more familiar with English on the Internet and from the pirated English movies and CDs that are cheap and readily available on every major street corner.

He admits they have trouble with the slang, but says the grammar comes easily for most Chinese students.

"They are good at memorizing," he laughs.

For the spoken word, the school relies on laboratory work, the monotonous repetition of words and phrases on to tape.

Short of travelling abroad to hone their skills, Berteig also suggests his students try to make an English friend or latch on to a tourist.

At New Oriental School, students pay \$70 to \$215 for a foreign language course and, besides English, they have a choice of learning Japanese, French, Korean or Italian.

"But we find they believe English is much more important," Zhou says. "It's more helpful in China now, and that is what they study."





The Calgary Herald (Calgary, AB)		Order/Commande 60363
Date 11.07.2006	Circ. 112128 Page A3	2 / 2



Peter Parks, AFP-Getty Images

School children in China start learning English in primary grades.



Bowdens

The Calgary Herald (Calgary, AB)		Order/Commande
		60363
Date 11.07.2006	Circ. 112128 Page A6	1 / 2

Klein puts off decision on more bonus bucks

He'd like to see a second round if money is there'

JASON FEKETE
CALGARY HERALD

Premier Ralph Klein retreated Monday from musings his government would issue a second round of prosperity cheques, saying cabinet has little appetite for them.

A final decision could be delayed until fall, he said.

Klein's backpedalling follows weeks of criticism from his Tory caucus and several of the candidates for his crown, who say repairing crumbling schools and building new ones should be the top priority.

"It's my sense that the whole thing will be deferred or set over to the fall some time so that we will have a better handle on how much money we'll have to deal with it," Klein told reporters at his annual Stampede breakfast at the McDougall Centre.

"Caucus will want to sort out the other priorities and then find out what's left over."

The premier wouldn't, however, rule out more rebates like the \$400 cheques dished out to Albertans earlier this year at a cost of \$1.3 billion to the provincial treasury.

They're "still a possibility," he said. "If the money is there, I would like to distribute it."

Klein said earlier this year that more bonuses were "likely" and reiterated his preference for them a few weeks ago when his government announced a record annual surplus of \$8.7 billion.

Add in the rebates and the surplus totalled about \$10 billion, of which \$2.7 billion has yet to be allocated.

But some of the seven candidates for the Conservative leadership have de-

nounced his wish to offer more cash back to Albertans, pointing to the crush of infrastructure demands facing school boards.

Calgary's public and Catholic boards together have a deferred maintenance backlog of more than \$500 million.

"It was a bad policy last year, it's a bad policy now and it will be a bad policy in future years," said leadership hopeful Ted Morton. "I would like to put it to bed once and forever."

Morton argued the cost of a second round of rebates would impede future governments' decisions. He also suggested the first round was poorly received by many Tories and was a factor in Klein's crippling leadership review vote last spring.

The premier said he now wants to wait for the first-quarter fiscal update, which is expected in late summer or early fall, before caucus makes a decision on more so-called Ralphbucks.

Jim Dinning, a former treasurer in the Klein government and early front-runner in the race, said he "wouldn't go to prosperity cheques," arguing there are far better ways to spend public dollars, including investing in schools, parks and culture.

"Those are longer-lasting, bigger-dividend-paying payoffs... rather than the instantaneous, one-time hit of a prosperity cheque," Dinning said Mon-

day at the breakfast.

Fellow leadership aspirant Mark Norris said he'd "never" issue the rebates, insisting the next premier should "eliminate the expectations" by crafting a detailed plan for how surplus dollars will be spent.

Klein does, however, have several backers in his caucus, including Health Minister Iris Evans and Finance Minister Shirley McClellan, who both said the cheques were popular with their constituents.

The premier added he doesn't care that his decision on the bonuses could saddle the next leader with great expectations and expenses.

"It's not my problem," he said.

Klein also quipped that he often wonders why those seeking his job would want all the pressure.

"You get a lot of free dinners, but after that you get sort of tired — especially when you quit drinking. Then it's not fun at all," he joked.

"I don't know why they would want to do it, other than the power and the glory, I guess."

Asked why he's stayed in the job for nearly 14 years, Klein said: "I wake up in the morning and I say, 'Why am I here?' And it's because I'm not all there."

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The Calgary Herald (Calgary, AB)		Order/Commande
		60363
Date 11.07.2006	Circ. 112128 Page A6	2 / 2

It's not my
problem

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PREMIER
RALPH KLEIN,
ON SADDLING
HIS SUCCESSOR
WITH THE
EXPENSE OF
REBATE CHEQUES



Mikael Kjellstrom, Calgary Herald
Ralph Klein flips flapjacks for the final time as premier during his annual Stampede pancake breakfast Monday at the McDougall Centre. Whether Klein can also serve up more Ralphbucks is a billion-dollar question.



Bowdens

The Calgary Herald (Calgary, AB)

Order/Commande

60363

Date 11.07.2006

Circ. 112128 Page A7

1 / 2

King Ralph flips final flapjack



TOM OLSEN
CALGARY'S EYE
ON ALBERTA POLITICS

CALGARY

He didn't get pied. No disgruntled hooligan giving Ralph Klein a banana cream send-off from his final Premier's Pancake Breakfast at the McDougall Centre.

On the contrary, it was something of a love-in.

People lined up in front of the premier to shake his hand, get a photo or have him sign something.

More than most of the "lasts" that Klein is experiencing as his time as provincial leader winds down, the annual Stampede flapjack flip was an event of some history and emotion.

The premier was in good spirits, cheekily wondering why any of the contenders for his job would want it.

"They get a lot of free dinners, but after that you get sort of tired — especially when you quit drinking, then it's not fun at all," he said. "I don't know why they would want to do it, other than power and the glory, I guess."

The Stampede gathering has typically been the last southern Alberta meet of Tory MLAs

before the summer schedule of barbecues, rodeos and golf

tournaments.

Something of importance usually comes out of it.

Thursday was to follow tradition, with some hard talk on school construction and prosperity cheques.

Except, the morning session was taken up by discussion of the upcoming Tory leadership race and whether Alberta needs another provincial park.

That would be near Cochrane, at a cost of \$40 million.

There's a clamour over medical wait lists and leaky school roofs, yet the morning was dedicated to the necessary or not of a new park. That was the "forward-looking" portion of the agenda, apparently.

Some MLAs figured the province is flush enough to do parks, schools and prosperity cheques, even as Finance Minister Shirley McClellan gave her standard warning that natural gas prices are bound to tank eventually.

Then there was debate on whether the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta should cover the cost of renting venues in each constituency to facilitate the leadership vote in the fall.

For some reason, the meaty matters of capital works didn't get going until 1 p.m., when a one-two presentation began, courtesy Education Minister Gene Zwozdesky and associate Infrastructure Minister Barry McFarland.

The subtext of all of it was the prosperity cheques. The subtext of that was the leadership

race. Most MLAs are lined up behind one of the wannabes for Klein's job. None of these would-be replacements are warm to the idea of more cash dividends to Albertans, meaning sitting members of caucus are torn between Ralph and whoever is next. Ralph loses.

Going in, Klein seemed tempered when it came to whether Albertans would see another round of prosperity cheques.

It was up to MLAs, who would first be given a run-down of the pressing infrastructure needs, he said.

"When they see the list relative to other capital projects, they might have some concerns about issuing a prosperity cheque at this time," said Klein.

Cue Zwozdesky and McFarland.

It was a lengthy list of schools, school upgrades, medical facilities, leisure centres, roads, highway overhauls — every demand from every corner of the province.

In the end, Klein's prosperity bonus plan, Part II, got punted right off the agenda, to be reconsidered in the fall, perhaps with money drawn from this year's surplus.

Ralph wasn't talking at day's end, and it fell to Zwozdesky to deliver some news on education.

The Tories approved \$19 mil-

lion for backlogged education upgrades, such as roofs, boilers, doors and windows.

"That's for the entire province of Alberta," said Zwozdesky.

Sounds like a lot of cash, but here's the context — the Calgary public system alone figures it has \$450 million in needed upgrades.

Still, the board wasn't criticizing anything as chump change.

"It sounds like the minister went in and made his case," said trustee Pat Cochrane. "It's a start, but it doesn't come close to what we need in the long term."

Calgary Liberal MLA Dave Taylor was less impressed, millions of dollars or no, suggesting Gene didn't fight hard enough.

"What's wrong with Zwozdesky? I'm glad he crossed over to the Tories," said Taylor, a shot at Zwoz's previous life as a Liberal MLA.

But really, Zwozdesky did just about as well as could be expected.

He cajoled a Band-Aid solution out of his government colleagues, which will allow schools to limp along until a new Tory leader and a broader education blueprint is in place.

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The Calgary Herald (Calgary, AB)		Order/Commande 60363
Date 11.07.2006	Circ. 112128 Page A7	2 / 2

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