



The Calgary Sun (Calgary, AB)

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Schools accused of repairs scam

By **BILL KAUFMANN**
Calgary Sun

Educators are manufacturing a school repair crisis to shake more cash out of the province, a taxpayers' advocate charged yesterday.

School boards have allowed their facilities to deteriorate to gain greater leverage with the government,

particularly at a time when massive budget surpluses are announced, said Scott Hennig, Alberta director of the Canadian Taxpayers' Federation.

"It's been left that way to lobby the government, they're leaving schools that way to convince the government they're broke," said Hennig.

"It's not a funding problem, it's more about allocation."

When provincial budgets come down, school boards and health regions applaud but change their tunes when provincial surpluses are unveiled later, he added.

"You don't have to be Karnac to predict they'll do it next year and the year after that," he said.

He agreed with government figures showing Alberta schools receive more funding per student than in any other province and questioned the

extent of disrepair.

Hennig's comments came after the province announced an extra \$119 million for school renovations, which boards have called a good first step, but a very small one.

Board trustee Pat Cochrane called Hennig's accusations baseless, adding the government's own audits show the district has \$426 million in deferred maintenance.

"We'd much rather be talking about teaching and learning than about keeping the buildings in shape," she said.

"If he really has concerns about how we spend our money, he can check our audit statements.

Trustees are hoping their district will receive \$25 million of the \$119 million and will immedi-

ately move to repair leaky roofs and windows while also replacing flooring, boilers and aging paint.

Fixing all the system's leaky roofs alone would cost \$15 million, said board members.

Cochrane said renovations or rebuilding of dilapidated Western Canada high school wouldn't be impacted by the newly announced funding and its future is still in limbo.

"They're leaving schools that way to convince the government they're broke."

— Scott Hennig,
Alberta director of Canadian Taxpayers' Federation

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— JACK CUSANO, Calgary Sun

DEFENCE ... Calgary school board trustee Pat Cochran, right, says accusations schools have amassed repair lists to

lobby the government for more money are baseless. The province announced \$119 million in funding earlier this week.



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LETTER OF THE DAY

IF THE provincial government decides to put more money into fixing schools, rather than another round of prosperity cheques, I hope they also announce an audit process that will be used to report to taxpayers where every penny of that money gets spent.

If they simply turn over a huge pile of money to school boards and trust the repairs will be made, then a year from now, we will likely find all the

money has been spent (no one will be able to tell us exactly where), minimal repairs will be partially completed at a handful of schools and the school boards will be whining for another big pile of money.

The school boards, like the city, don't have a revenue problem, they have a spending problem!
John Robertson
 (How about auditing the province while we're at it?)





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New cash to help hire teachers

New provincial cash for schools will allow the Calgary public school board to recruit 65 additional teachers and shrink classroom sizes, say grateful trustees.

After receiving some details on \$61 million in instruction funding, board members said they expect to receive about \$14 million that will help hire the new teachers for kindergarten to Grade 3 levels, said trustee Pat Cochrane.

The infusion should also allow classrooms to achieve a level of 17 students per classroom in K-3, in line with provincial recommendations, she said.

English as a second language students will also have their instruction extended to six years from five and funding for special needs instruction has been boosted, said trustee

KATHERINE





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Review askew Public deserves royalty debate



Rick
Bell

Gas up the new Escalade, buy another house or two or three, score another bonus or more big moolah stock options and an additional super salary hike. Live the life, sky's the limit.

Hell, spend 50 bucks on a cover charge to a bar and tip the waitress the world with somebody else's money and brag all the way to the bank about the bottom line in the world of \$74 oil. Who cares? Here for a good time, not a long time. The conspicuous consumption of the carpet-bagger. As for the common good? That kind of talk is for losers.

When it comes to the affluent oilpatch or ordinary wage slave Albertans, it takes not even a nanosecond of choice for the Tories. Tell the school boards or the hospitals to make do because they're whiners who just teach kids and fix people. But the oil and gas bigshots merely remove the provincial government out of their deep back pocket, wind the appropriate Tory up and send the compliant Conservative out to the public to read from the corporate script.

Enter Greg Melchin, the province's energy minister, who asks how high when the petroleum high fliers say jump.

Melchin has now finished his so-called lengthy "internal review" of whether the oil and gas biz is paying its fair share

in royalties to Albertans who own the resources.

There is no actual report of the internal review released, no single sheet of scribbling to show the curious. There is no public discussion, no options offered for the study and debate of citizens. But the internal review is done.

And what does this internal review with no paper and no public participation actually say, if such a probe exists?

Golly gee, Melchin finds oil and gas outfits pay a fair share. There will be no changes to royalties. The government of the man of the people once again does not side with the people.

Even though a potpourri of people, including those enduring the wild mess of Fort Mac and former premier Peter Lougheed, who stood up and hiked royalties, ask tough questions, the current Tories do not disappoint, petropatsies all the way.

Even though a recent poll says Albertans want a public review of royalties, since the industry is making unimaginable coin on a non-renewable resource we own, and the province's own numbers confirm

the people's share of oil and gas riches is getting smaller, Melchin sounds like a brochure from the top floors of the highest office towers.

He says the province's 1% royalty, where the oilsands companies pay almost squat until all their construction costs are fully recovered whenever

such a state eventually occurs, is just such a peachy 1%.

"Everybody mentions the one percent. Clearly, one percent is a low royalty rate. You could choose potentially another number."

The Tories don't. Melchin says oil companies take risks and costs are going

up. Even with the 1% solution, oilsands projects are "at risk" and have a "tremendous downside."

Melchin, sounding like the spin doctor of the petroleum producers, says "you don't just go and change the rules, that would be a very destructive signal."

Fresh from an operation on the first of two cataracts, I weep out of my one good eye for the oppressed oil companies. Of course, all rubbish aside, the province could gradually put in some changes if they wanted to do so but they simply don't.

The energy minister insists if it is windfalls we're after, most profits come from conventional oil and gas. So are we changing royalties on those? Quick answer: No.

As a small concession, after being bugged by provincial auditors general for 14 years, the Tories look like they will stop a program of financial assistance to the oil and gas biz costing taxpayers more than \$100 million this year.

Brian Mason, the NDP leader who fought for the facts when taxpayer millions were siphoned off by packers during the mad cow mess, sees this as Alberta's normal abnormal.

"What a sham. Did a review even happen? What did Melchin do, sit down with oil companies for a nice meal at the Petroleum Club and ask them if they want to pay higher royalties?"

Melchin says he didn't allow the public a say because royalties are "a very technical question" but "if at some other future time there's a thought there needs to be a public discussion and debate, that can be at a future date."

But must we wait until Hell freezes over?

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■ Royalty farce: Editorial, P. 1A

