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Advanced Education & Technology

Agriculture & Food

Children’s Services

Education

RVSD heads in new direction; School division on the lookout for money-making ideas

Cochrane Times

Wed 19 Dec 2007

Page: 30

Section: News

Byline: BY KAREN LAZARUK, SUN MEDIA

Generating revenue to supplement provincial funding is the new game plan for Rocky View School Division (RVSD).

Instead of choosing to send a message to the province about its disapproval over insufficient grant funding by cutting services with each budget year, the RVSD board of trustees voted Thursday to take a different tack -- make its own money.

RVSD superintendent Greg Bass said he was pleased that during the board's regular meeting, members didn't just show support for his recommendation, the school division looked at ways to generate dollars, but directed administration to get on it right away.

"I would hazard a guess that this is the most bold strategy in the province," Bass said, adding that the board had the choice of continuing to do the best it can with the dollars from Alberta Education or make some changes.

"I use the analogy of a household budget -- if you don't have enough money, you have to reduce expenditures or increase revenue," he said. "We need to do both."

Bass said he'd directed RVSD departments to review budgets to "create efficiencies," but said there is revenue to be generated by utilizing the skills and talents of RVSD staff members in the public and business arenas. Among the suggestions are:

- producing for-profit publications on research and education topics;
- partnering with post-secondary institutions to offer credit courses using RVSD facilities and teachers;
- offering RVSD staff members services as presenters for professional development events;
- recruiting international students, who bring with them tuition dollars;
- offering RVSD staff members services in the psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and counselling fields;
- offering planning and graphic design services; and
- partnering with business for capital projects.

"We would provide a good service and hopefully generate some revenues as well," Bass said, adding that while RVSD employees would be compensated for such services, a cost-sharing model will be used between RVSD and those benefiting from the service.

The superintendent said the intent is not to "commodify" or "marketize" the school division, but to raise funds to provide quality programs for students.

"It's all part of going from good to great."

Catholic teachers accept 5-year deal

The Calgary Herald

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: B1 / FRONT

Section: City & Region

Byline: Sean Myers
Source: Calgary Herald

Calgary Catholic teachers joined their public counterparts in accepting a new five-year contract Wednesday, a move that may lead to an extended period of labour peace in classrooms across the province.

In a vote held at the Red and White Club in the city's northwest, 98 per cent of Catholic teachers said yes to a new deal that includes a three per cent wage increase in the first year.

"We're very pleased to see an overwhelming endorsement of the work of our bargaining team," said David Cracknell, president of the Calgary Catholic union.

In addition to the salary hike, the teachers would keep another three per cent they had been paying out to the \$2.2-billion unfunded pension liability.

The province has said it'll cover the pension liability, if all the province's school districts sign five-year deals by Jan. 31.

Calgary public and Catholic teachers have held separate votes on the provincial proposal, but those results won't be known until all of Alberta's school districts have voted.

"Our teachers agreed to the five-year term and the three per cent increase, which were part of the provincial mandate," said Cracknell. "So in principle, our teachers are showing agreement with the provincial proposal."

Teachers with the Calgary Board of Education voted in favour of a five-year deal last week and trustees unanimously ratified the agreement Tuesday. The CBE is the first large urban board in Alberta to ratify its collective agreement.

Calgary Catholic trustees still have to ratify the deal with its teachers.

The provincial proposal includes a \$1,500 one-time bonus for teachers.

During the remaining four years of their contracts, they would receive a wage hike based on Alberta's average weekly earnings index. It's the same index used to determine MLA salary increases.

Cracknell said about 550 of the city's approximately 2,600 Catholic teachers turned out for the vote Wednesday.

He said Christmas holidays and illness among teachers affected the turnout.

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Employment, Immigration & Industry

Alberta migration numbers show startling reversal; StatsCan reports more people leaving province

The Calgary Herald

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: A4

Section: News

Byline: Kim Guttormson

Source: Calgary Herald

The Canadians who have helped fuel Alberta's economic boom are going home -- especially those from Saskatchewan -- with more people leaving our province over the past few months than moving here.

And Saskatchewan, typically a reliable source of new Albertans, has taken over the position as the fastest-growing province in the country when it comes to population. And that's before the Roughriders won their first Grey Cup in 18 years.

"It makes it more challenging for Alberta because traditionally it's relied on bright young educated people from Saskatchewan and they're staying home in greater numbers," said Todd Hirsch, senior economist at ATB Financial.

A Statistics Canada report released Wednesday found that between July and October, 3,316 more people left Alberta for other provinces than moved here, the first negative inter-provincial migration number in 13 years.

However, Alberta's overall population still increased by 12,783 because of the number of births and people arriving from other countries. And the province was one of four that had its population rate increase above Canada's rate.

Saskatchewan saw an overall population increase of 6,430 during the same three months, pushing it above the one million mark for the first time since 2001 -- and making it about the same size as Calgary.

"Every province is gaining through the change happening in Alberta," Hubert Denis, a senior demographer with Statistics Canada, said. "It's happening more extensively in Saskatchewan.

"Almost all the provinces in Canada did win from the change in trends of Alberta migration. Everybody is going back home."

Denis said the odd thing about more people leaving Alberta is that it's not tied to an economic slowdown.

Hirsch said the reversal in migration will make it more difficult for Alberta companies already short of workers.

"It's going to make labour availability even worse," he said.

But Harry Hiller, director of the Alberta in-migration study at the University of Calgary, said a slowdown in the province's red-hot economy isn't necessarily a bad thing.

"We need a breather," he said.

Katie Domm and Kyle Crowder were part of the eastern exodus in the third quarter of 2007, moving to Saskatoon so Domm could attend medical school.

While Saskatchewan is home for Domm, the couple found the move wasn't quite what they expected. Renting in Calgary, they planned to buy in Saskatoon, but found the housing market going through the roof. Homes listed for \$379,000 would sell for \$479,000. And they're paying \$275 more a month in rent, Domm added.

"Most people think it's cheaper here, but it's not," Crowder said.

Domm said the irony is that some of the same problems experienced in Calgary have followed returning residents.

"Traffic is a nightmare," she said of Saskatoon. "They had really unprecedented growth in the past year and it doesn't seem like they have planned for it."

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Canada's population surpasses 33 million; Saskatchewan fast-growing, 2001 Census says

National Post

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: A4

Section: Canada

Dateline: OTTAWA

Source: CanWest News Service

OTTAWA - Canada's population has topped 33 million for the first time, according to figures released yesterday.

Statistics Canada says Saskatchewan has replaced Alberta as the fastest-growing province, with more than one million people for the first time since 2001.

The numbers are based on population counts from the 2001 Census.

As of Oct. 1, 2007, Canada's population was estimated at 33,091,200, up by 115,200 from July 1, 2007. It is the strongest growth rate in six years.

Provincially, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Ontario and Alberta had population growth rates higher than the rest of the country with Saskatchewan's population reaching a record high of 1,003,300.

Immigration also remained strong with Canada receiving an estimated 71,600 newcomers, an increase not seen in more than 30 years.

Alberta, which has typically led the provinces in population growth, has started to lose more people to other regions with provinces such as Newfoundland and Labrador and Saskatchewan benefiting the most.

The population of all four Atlantic provinces rose, but at a slower pace than the rest of Canada.

Prince Edward Island was the fastest-growing province in the Atlantic region. It also received more immigrants than ever before.

Newfoundland and Labrador's population was estimated at 507,500, up by 1,200, the highest increase since 1992.

New Brunswick also posted an increase, while Nova Scotia had the slowest population growth among the provinces of just below 1,000 people.

Manitoba, British Columbia and Ontario are the other provinces posting an immigration rate higher than the national level.

Ontario's population increased to an estimated 12,850,600, a faster growth rate than the rest of country due mainly to interprovincial migration.

However, Ontario's attraction for immigrants is declining.

The population of Quebec, the second-most populous province, increased but at a slower rate than the national average.

The number of births in Quebec is still on the rise, and its rate of natural increase is second only to Alberta.

British Columbia's population hit an estimated 4,402,900, the second fastest growth-rate among the provinces, due mainly to an increase in interprovincial migration. International migration accounted for nearly 60% of B.C.'s growth.

Manitoba saw a demographic increase slightly below the national rate although it is the province's strongest increase since 1983 due to strong influx of immigrants.

The only territory to post a faster demographic growth rate than the rest of the country was the Yukon, where the population reached 31,100.

StatsCan says the Northwest Territories was the only jurisdiction to record a decline, largely because of interprovincial migration while Nunavut posted one of the smallest population increases in its brief history. Without its strong birth rate, Nunavut's population would have declined.

Energy

Deputy energy minister will head new regulatory board

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: B5

Section: Alberta

Byline: Duncan Thorne

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: The Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - A provincial official who came under fire from the auditor general over royalties is to head up Alberta's new energy regulatory agency.

The government is appointing Dan McFadyen, currently deputy energy minister, as chairman of the Energy Resources Conservation Board Feb. 1.

The ERCB takes over responsibility for energy regulation from the often-criticized Energy Utilities Board, which is winding down.

Without naming McFadyen directly, provincial Auditor General Fred Dunn accused the deputy minister and other senior officials in October of giving him a "runaround" at the start of a royalties audit. They were coy about what a royalty review meant and what information they were obligated to supply to him, Dunn said at the time.

The auditor general found that the government missed out on billions of dollars in oil and gas royalties over the past three years. He said energy department staff were telling their bosses as far back as 2004 the province could squeeze extra cash from the industry, but the deputy minister and other senior officials "chose not to act."

Dunn could not be reached Wednesday, but his spokeswoman, Lori Trudgeon, passed along a comment from him that it's not for his office to comment on McFadyen's appointment.

Jason Chance, speaking for the energy department, said the government would have been aware of Dunn's criticisms, which were public knowledge, when choosing McFadyen to lead the ERCB. Chance said Dunn's perception that McFadyen was coy was "one individual's opinion."

There was a comprehensive search for someone to head up the ERCB, Chance said. Clearly, McFadyen's "experience and his knowledge of the energy industry, along with his first-hand knowledge of provincial policies related to responsible energy developments, have made him an ideal candidate."

Hugh MacDonald, Liberal energy critic, said Energy Minister Mel Knight has made a mistake approving McFadyen.

"If they want to restore public confidence in that energy regulatory process, anybody but someone from the department of energy would have been suitable," MacDonald said.

He said the government advertised across Canada for candidates and should have chosen someone from outside Alberta.

The Journal revealed in June that the EUB had hired private investigators to monitor, and gather information about, landowners and environmentalists worried about a Wabamun-to-Calgary power line. An investigation by former Court of Queen's Bench justice Del Perras later faulted the EUB and found its eavesdropping of landowners' phone calls was "repulsive."

The government is dividing the EUB into two agencies, the ERCB and the Alberta Utilities Commission. As well as announcing McFadyen's ERCB appointment, the government said that Willie Grieve, currently regulatory affairs vice-president at Telus, will become AUC chairman Feb. 1.

In a prepared statement, Knight did not refer specifically to the controversy over the eavesdropping by the EUB. But he said: "Albertans expect their energy regulators to respect and listen to the views of those affected by energy development before decisions are made."

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Regulators 'turn the corner'

The Calgary Sun

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: 72

Section: Business

Byline: BY REUTERS

Alberta's restructured energy regulators will emerge from this year's scandal as more stable operations in 2008, with a major new focus on water conservation in oil and gas projects, its chairman said.

Bill Tilleman, appointed in September to restore credibility at the Energy and Utilities Board after spying revelations, is overseeing its impending split into two regulatory operations.

Since he disbanded the board's security unit and accepted resignations from senior officials in the wake of the spying controversy, public perception has improved, Tilleman said.

"Things have gone more smoothly in the last month. We've had less concern, less opposition and more respect for the board," the Calgary lawyer said.

"We've turned the corner."

In January, the EUB will split to form two separate bodies. One will be the Energy Resources Conservation Board, regulating development of the largest oil deposits outside the Middle East.

The other will be the Alberta Utilities Commission, overseeing electricity and utility firms.

Tilleman said investors in those industries can expect predictability after a rocky 2007 for the EUB, which was seen as a global model for fairness, but increasingly took criticism from some Albertans who said it had become too pro-development.

That culminated last spring when AltaLink applied to build a high-voltage power line between Calgary and Edmonton, a project strongly opposed by a group of landowners.

Tempers flared at public hearings, leading to pushing and shoving. It later emerged the board had hired private detectives to keep tabs on the landowners.

Tilleman made several quick changes, including ushering some senior officials out the door and tossing out the AltaLink application, in what he said amounted to a mistrial.

Water conservation and safety concerns are causing growing alarm in the province, as accelerating development of oilsands and other fossil fuels demands huge volumes of it.

"You're going to find that's very big to me," Tilleman said. "You're going to see some significant co-operation with Alberta Environment ... regarding water conservation."

Industry veterans to head regulators; New energy chiefs hail from Telus, government

The Calgary Herald

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: F1 / FRONT

Section: Calgary Business

Byline: Geoffrey Scotton

Source: Calgary Herald

The Alberta government has appointed two regulatory veterans to the top jobs in the province's new energy regulatory bodies on Wednesday.

It named Telus Corp. vice-president Willie Grieve as founding chairman of the Alberta Utilities Commission and Dan McFadyen, deputy minister of energy, as chairman of the reconstituted Energy Resources Conservation Board.

Both of the appointments are effective Feb. 1, 2008, and follow the government's decision earlier this year to split regulation of oil and gas, and of electricity and provincially regulated pipelines, into separate bodies. That decision prompted the Alberta Utilities Commission Act, or Bill 46, which was passed with much controversy and the government's use of closure earlier this month.

Neither Grieve nor McFadyen were available for comment Wednesday. However, in prepared remarks in a government news release, both said they are looking forward to their new roles.

Energy Minister Mel Knight said the new energy regulatory regime in the province has created high expectations among both the public and industry. "Meeting these high expectations requires effective leadership within the new regulatory bodies and I am confident we have that in Mr. Grieve and Mr. McFadyen," said Knight.

"Albertans expect their energy regulators to respect and listen to the views of those affected by energy development before decisions are made," Knight added. "They also want dependable electricity and utility services and . . . assurances that the energy resources they own are being developed in a responsible way."

Although the decision to remake the regulatory landscape had already been made, the existing regulator, the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, was thrown into disarray and its reputation damaged earlier this year after it was revealed the regulator had spied on landowners opposed to a project it was adjudicating. That resulted in the departure of a number of staff and, eventually, a number of board members.

William Tilleman, a Calgary lawyer who was parachuted into the top energy board job in September by Knight to clean house and oversee its wind-down, will act as resources conservation board chairman until McFadyen takes over.

"We have paved the way for the ERCB and the AUC to regulate Alberta's energy resources and utilities in a way that people know is balanced and fair, and for the ERCB to have a necessary focus on conservation," said Tilleman.

"I know that Willie Grieve and Dan McFadyen are well qualified to lead the two new boards."

McFadyen brings to the table more than 20 years in the public service and public policy sphere, much of it connected to energy, with roles in the energy arms of the governments of Alberta, Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan and a senior role with the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association. Oil and gas industry leaders said Wednesday that McFadyen is a solid choice for the job.

"We worked with Dan in Saskatchewan when he was assistant deputy minister, Nova Scotia as deputy (minister) and here as deputy (minister of energy)," said Pierre Alvarez, president of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers.

"Industry has worked with Dan and looks forward to working with him (and) looks forward to the transition being over."

The move to remake Alberta's energy regulation coincided with the government's decision to change Alberta's royalty structure and a period of overall high and rising industry costs juxtaposed with low natural gas prices.

"It's been a long year of the legislation and the changes and the people and all that," Alvarez said. "From our point of view, it's back to dealing with things without the overhang of change in the air."

Grieve is a Telus veteran, its vice-president of regulatory affairs for the past decade and has a long history representing governments and regulators as legal counsel, including the Public Utilities Review Commission of Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan government and the federal government, among others. Much of his work occurred in the midst of telecom deregulation.

"We think that, coming from a successfully restructured market like telecommunications, Grieve will probably bring very good insight and value to his role as chair of the AUC, plus with his regulatory affairs background, he appreciates matters of due process and how to handle legislation," said Independent Power Producers Society of Alberta executive director Evan Bahry.

Peter Hunt, vice-president of City of Calgary-owned Enmax Corp., an electricity generator and retailer that serves a third of Albertans, also had a positive response to Grieve's appointment.

"It's good to see the government's appointed someone with such wide-ranging experience across not only different industry sectors, but also widely varied geographies," said Hunt. "We believe the regulatory system can be improved to reduce costs, produce improved outcomes for consumers and also help with the introduction of environmentally better technologies. The breadth and depth of Mr. Grieve's experience will provide an excellent background. . . and we look forward to working with him."

Jim Wachowich, an Edmonton lawyer who has represented the Consumers' Coalition of Alberta in utility hearings and is familiar with Grieve, said the lawyer brings a good skill set to the fore.

"I have crossed paths with him. This is a guy with a tremendous depth of experience in telecom regulatory issues," said Wachowich. "This guy has been through a pretty big regulatory event that few in Canada have."

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Environment

Finance (including Pensions/Insurance)

Entrepreneurs foresee dimmer Q1; Alberta businesses expect cooling economy in 2008

The Calgary Herald

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: F3

Section: Calgary Business

Byline: Dina O'Meara

Source: Calgary Herald

Alberta entrepreneurs dimmed their outlooks for the first quarter of 2008 to reflect a cooler economy, registering the lowest level of optimism in years, according to two separate surveys.

Small- to mid-sized businesses were smiling less when looking ahead, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business and a joint ATB Financial-Western Centre for Economic Research study showed Wednesday.

Concerns over low activity levels in the conventional oilpatch, a strong dollar, and uncertainty around new royalties weighed heavily on Alberta businesses, the two groups agreed.

"This is the lowest (the index) has been in nine quarters, since we started it," said Todd Hirsch, senior economist with ATB. "It's more than edging downward a bit -- it's gone from 150 for the first quarter of 2006 to 125."

However, the slide in optimism is a far cry from being in the doldrums, Hirsch was quick to point out.

The province still outpaces the rest of Canada in overall growth, reflected in an inflation rate twice the national average despite a levelling of Alberta's explosive economy.

"Alberta business owners are just bringing their sentiments down to more realistic levels," Hirsch said.

"In a normal, good, healthy economy, there's always going to be some worries about the economy and in 2006 there really weren't any. Now we're moving back into an era of sustainable economic growth."

The ATB-Western Centre survey polled more than 400 Alberta businesses in six key industry sectors, all of which fell in the index. Not surprisingly, confidence in the oil and gas sector dropped the most for 2008, with construction companies experiencing the sunniest outlook. Sandwiched in between were manufacturing, professional and technical, transportation and warehousing, and wholesale sectors.

Northern sentiments hit a 131 index value, compared with Calgary and Southern Alberta's 118 rating, pointing toward continued oilsands growth.

"The challenge in Alberta will be to maintain that growth in the face of what is going on in that big world around us, including the potential not simply for stagnant growth in the North American economy, but for outright recession," survey co-author Dr. Ted Chambers, with the University of Alberta's Western Centre for Economic Research, said in a statement.

In a second survey, the CFIB business barometer index for Alberta registered 103.5, the third consecutive quarterly drop for the province.

The fall placed Alberta below the national index of 104.2 (the lowest average since the aftermath of hurricane Katrina saw gasoline prices hit triple digits at the pump) for the first time.

"We're seeing a pattern," senior policy analyst Janine Halbesma said from Toronto. "There are things that are still going well for us in Alberta, but I think it's just the whole range of uncertainty in the province that business owners are really looking to. Some shifts are happening."

Despite the lesser enthusiasm from the 176 Albertan respondents polled, 43 per cent of small- and mid-sized businesses expect stronger performances next year. Another 37 per cent expect to bump up their staff roster, compared with 31 per cent nationally.

Nationally, the most optimistic province was Saskatchewan, which is experiencing strong growth in the oil and gas sector, as well as housing. Optimism slid in Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia and British Columbia, although B.C. remained well above the national average.

New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador showed little change, whereas Quebec and Prince Edward Island hovered at or below the national average.

The CFIB findings were based on 1,751 responses and reflect trends in 10 industry sectors including construction, agriculture, manufacturing, transportation, wholesale, hospitality, retail, finance and realty, healthcare/education, and business services.

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Alberta business sentiment at lowest point in two years, survey says

National Post

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: FP4

Section: Financial Post

Byline: Jon Harding

Source: Financial Post

Business sentiment in Alberta has dropped to its lowest point in two years, with the mood particularly grim within the Calgary-based oil-and-gas sector. The ATB Financial Business Sentiments Index, compiled quarterly from surveys of 400 Alberta businesses since late 2005, stands at 124.7 for the first quarter of 2008, its lowest point to date. The index was at 140.2 a year ago. A reading of 100 is neutral and anything above is considered positive. While the index is down in all six sector groupings since the previous survey in August, the steepest decline -- from 157 to 111 -- was measured among oil and gas

companies. Sentiment in Northern Alberta and Edmonton posted an index value of 131, while in Calgary and Southern Alberta it was 118.

Health & Wellness

Ed eyes health incentive; Dropping premiums a possibility, says premier

The Edmonton Sun

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: 7

Section: News

Byline: BY JIM MACDONALD, CP

Premier Ed Stelmach is talking for the first time about the possibility of eliminating health-care premiums as part of his party's next election platform.

Even though Alberta has been awash in surplus cash for years, the Progressive Conservative government has resisted the idea of dropping health premiums, which only exist in three provinces.

But Stelmach is signalling that a policy change may be in the works for premiums, which cost \$1,056 per year for families and \$528 for singles.

"The revenue is close to \$1 billion," he told The Canadian Press in a year-end interview.

"There are a number of ideas coming forward from people that are looking at developing policy positions for the campaign. But we're far from making any kind of decisions."

Health Minister Dave Hancock said he's been talking to government caucus members for months about how the province can eliminate or at least reduce health premiums for some people.

Hancock says he'd like to see the province create incentives for people to lead healthy lifestyles.

"Whether we collect it as a premium or we collect it as a tax - give people credit for the things that they do to remain healthy," he said yesterday.

The message to Albertans would be: "We can take health-care premiums off, but you have to do something for it.

"That's what I'm promoting, that we take a look at how you can earn your premium back by doing some pre-screening tests, by engaging in health activity, those sort of things."

The group Friends of Medicare was delighted to hear that the government appears to have had a change of heart over health premiums, which are also charged in Ontario and British Columbia.

"This is the time to get rid of these premiums. We've never been wealthier," said Suzanne Marshall, executive director of the Edmonton-based lobby group. "We consider health-care premiums like a flat tax - you pay regardless of circumstance or income."

Calgary political analyst Keith Brownsey says eliminating health-care premiums certainly hasn't been on the Conservative agenda and signals a reversal of previous government policy dating back to the 1970s.

Brownsey says the move may be part of a strategy to prevent the opposition Liberals and New Democrats from using the issue in their election platforms.

But he also says the Tories may end up eliminating premiums for children or seniors only.

"I cannot see the Stelmach government losing that amount of revenue at this time in our political history."

MRI on wheels to serve rural residents; Mobile unit will cut travel, wait times for scans

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: B3

Section: Cityplus

Byline: Jodie Sinnema

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: The Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - A \$4.5-million MRI machine will be driven around the Aspen and East Central Health regions to bring magnetic resonance image scans quicker to rural residents.

Located in a tractor trailer that was built around the machine, the mobile unit will travel between Cold Lake, Hinton, Westlock, Camrose and Lloydminster to improve imaging services outside the Edmonton area.

It's the only such machine-on-wheels in Alberta, though a similar one travels in B.C.'s interior and several others operate in Ontario. The mobile units are more common in the United States.

"We're really proud we're able to be leading edge in technology and innovation," said Andrew Will, president and CEO of Aspen Regional Health, which covers a broad area from Jasper in the west to Cold Lake in the east. "Our hope is that this unit will meet the majority of needs of our residents."

Neither health region had magnetic resonance imaging services before, forcing people to travel to Edmonton to check on suspected cancers, growths and musculoskeletal injuries.

Since Nov. 19, when the MRI began providing services in Westlock, 245 patients have used the service, reducing their travel time and the stress of driving to and parking in the big city.

Aspen expects to scan 3,500 to 4,000 people annually with the new unit, and East Central Health hopes to help 3,000 people in the first year.

"We hope this will increase the access (to health services)," said Dr. Odell Olson, vice-president of medical services for East Central Health, which includes Lloydminster, Mundare and Camrose. Instead of waiting several weeks to get elective MRIs, residents would only wait one week, since the unit spends four days in one city, uses one day for travel time, then reopens the next week in a different location. Two technicians travel with the machine.

In the Aspen region, patients with urgent cases have been able to get MRI scans in Edmonton in less than one week, Will said. Less urgent cases have been scheduled within two to four weeks. The new machine will also decrease the volumes of MRIs done in Edmonton and allow Capital Health to provide the services to others, he said.

The Aspen and East Central regions have dedicated funding to pay for the MRI and will share the estimated annual operating costs of \$1.3 million.

Some towns must still complete construction of a cement pad beside and special hookups to the hospitals, where the MRI truck will dock. Patients will walk into the truck and have their scans done there. The images will be transmitted to Calgary, where they will be interpreted.

Olson said the new MRI machine has a magnet with a larger diameter, allowing larger people to be scanned.

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Infrastructure & Transportation

Sick of 'Suicide 63'; Building trades council urges province to pick up pace on twinning highway

The Edmonton Sun

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: 3

Section: News

Byline: BY DANIEL MACISAAC, SUN MEDIA

The Alberta Building Trades Council is calling Highway 63 "Suicide 63" in the wake of the latest deadly crash.

And it's calling on the province to pick up the pace on twinning the roadway to Fort McMurray and cut down on the carnage.

"Workers changing shifts and buses transporting workers in and out of the oilsands operations are at high risk," said council executive director Ron Harry in an open letter to the province yesterday. "A bus or a car is no competition for the tankers and heavy-equipment haulers that travel this road."

Harry said some 25 people have died and 250 have been injured in 1,000 crashes over the last five years on Highway 63.

And he pointed to several incidents involving workers, including the Dec. 12 collision near Mariana Lake between a Red Arrow bus bound for Fort Mac and a tanker-truck that sent 12 people to hospital - and which remains under investigation.

"So many deaths and injuries could have been prevented if the road was improved 10 years ago when it was already over capacity," Harry said.

In the latest fatality, Boyle RCMP said a 49-year-old Jasper man died Tuesday following a head-on collision between his Toyota Tundra and a Dodge Ram on Highway 63 about 10 km north of Wandering River.

Mounties said driver error was to blame for the crash and charges are likely.

The Building Trades Council, which represents some 50,000 unionized construction workers, argues the province and Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo MLA Guy Boutilier should have anticipated the region's rapid growth and worked harder to begin the Highway 63 twinning project earlier than last summer.

"It's time for Premier Stelmach and Mr. Boutilier to show leadership in cleaning up the carnage on Highway 63," Harry said.

But Infrastructure and Transportation spokesman Jerry Bellikka says the billion-dollar project to twin 240 km of highway between Fort McMurray and Grassland - 130 km northeast of Edmonton - is proceeding as quickly as possible given conditions like the six-month construction season and the difficulty of the terrain.

"We're going as fast as we can," he said. "There are a limited number of crews - though the capacity of the construction industry is better than it was a few years ago.

"But it's also simply the task of trying to bulldoze roads through muskeg."

Bellikka also points to statistics from 2001-2005 showing that the collision rate of 87 per 100 million km driven on Highway 63 is 20% lower than the provincial average of 110 for two-lane highways, and that more than half of collisions are with wildlife.

"People call it the 'Highway of Death,' " he said. "But the highway itself is a good road, and it's the way that people drive on it that gives it that reputation.

"The people going up and back are in such a hurry they don't want to wait in a line of traffic."

The province is also planning to have more sheriffs patrol the route.

South leg of ring road a step closer to reality; Residents fear traffic woes due to casino

The Calgary Herald

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: A3

Section: News

Byline: Tony Seskus, with files from Jamie Komarnicki, Calgary Herald

Source: Calgary Herald

After months of delay, progress has finally been made on a key step needed to jump-start negotiations on a strip of Tsuu T'ina land essential for the construction of the southwest leg of Calgary's long-awaited ring road.

A provincial spokesman said a draft appraisal for the property has been received, meaning Tsuu T'ina and government officials could meet as soon as mid-January to work through details of the roughly 400-page report.

Details of the appraisal are not being released, but observers have previously suggested the land is worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

"It's not the final piece of the puzzle by any stretch, but it certainly helps both sides work towards a final solution," Alberta Infrastructure and Transportation spokesman Jerry Bellikka said Wednesday.

News that a draft appraisal was in hand was welcomed by area residents and politicians, who believe a ring road is sorely needed to meet the traffic demands of the city's growing southwest communities.

Congestion concerns were raised again Wednesday by the opening of the Grey Eagle Casino on the Tsuu T'ina reserve.

"Any step is a big step as it relates to the ring road negotiation," said Scott Blasken of the Lakeview Community Association.

Initially, an independent appraisal on the land was expected more than a year ago. But the complexities of the task, including the city's volatile real estate market, slowed the appraisal firm's progress.

Bellikka wouldn't speculate as to the speed of future negotiations, but added that the government aims to have an agreement in 2008.

"We think both sides are working in earnest to get a deal done, but it's a very detailed, complex negotiation," he added.

"There are some environmentally sensitive areas. There's a right of way not just for a road, but for an entire transportation and utility corridor, and we're trying to plan for 20 to 30 years out -- not just what we need in five years."

Residents in southwest Calgary will be looking for a resolution as soon as possible, with the new casino highlighting some of their worries about traffic congestion and vehicles cutting through residential communities.

Liberal MLA Craig Cheffins, who represents Calgary-Elbow, focused on resident concerns at a news conference Wednesday afternoon.

"The casino is opening, there's no southwest ring road in place and it's just not right," Cheffins said later in an interview.

But Tsuu T'ina Chief Sandford Big Plume tried to ease concerns about traffic headaches around the casino, adding he's confident a traffic study that showed little impact will be proven to be correct.

"Access to the casino is easy," Big Plume told reporters at the casino's opening.

"We have installed a no-right-turn sign to stop patrons and employees from turning into Lakeview and into the nation."

Mayor Dave Bronconnier doesn't think the casino traffic alone will be a big issue for local roads.

However, he said further development planned for the area underscores the importance for the province and the Tsuu T'ina to reach an agreement for the ring road.

The mayor said if there's no deal in the coming months, the province and the city will be faced with "some very tough choices" next year with respect to other options for dealing with future traffic volumes.

One of those options could be a revamped 37th Street S.W., which would not provide immediate access to the casino for traffic safety reasons. Such a move could mean casino patrons would have to drive to the casino using Anderson Road.

"Before the end of 2008, we will have a very clear direction on how we're proceeding with transportation in the southwest quadrant," Bronconnier said.

"Hopefully, there will be a resolution that meets favourable terms for the province and the Tsuu T'ina so that they can move forward and secure the long-term transportation needs for southwest Calgary."

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International, Intergovernmental & Aboriginal Affairs

Saskatche-win!; Province takes over from Alberta as leader in growth

The Edmonton Sun

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: 4

Section: News

Byline: BY KEVIN CRUSH, SUN MEDIA

Saskatchewan has dethroned Alberta as the king of population growth.

Statistics Canada is reporting that Saskatchewan nearly doubled Alberta's rate of growth between July and October, making our eastern neighbour the fastest growing province in Canada.

With a 0.65% increase in population, Saskatchewan topped a million residents for the first time since 2001. Alberta saw a 0.37% increase during the same time.

And Saskatchewan will likely see further increases, says the executive director of the University of Alberta's population research laboratory.

"Saskatchewan is on the edge of a much faster growth rate," said Michael Mehta.

A large aboriginal population approaching the reproduction age will create strong natural growth, he said, while Saskatchewan will continue to attract workers to its fledgling oilsands industry and other resource sectors.

Most of Saskatchewan's current growth is from interprovincial migration, reports Statistics Canada, primarily Saskatchewanians returning from Alberta.

"The joke in Saskatchewan was that the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina were really there to train people for Alberta," said Mehta.

Saskatchewan's population has not been healthy for people between the ages of 23 and 50, said Mehta. That is now starting to change.

Tom Vernon, 26, is one Albertan making the switch to Saskatchewan. A radio reporter in Grande Prairie, he's starting the new year at CKRM in Regina.

"Regina is Grande Prairie six or seven years ago. It's on the verge of booming. I'm getting in on a good thing," said Vernon.

"I'm talking to friends of mine that have moved there before me and they say there is a lot of energy, a lot of younger people there."

Statistics Canada numbers show 3,300 more people moved out of Alberta between July and October than moved into the province. However, a high birth rate and strong international immigration kept the province growing, although at a slower rate.

Two more surveys are showing similar slowdowns in Alberta. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business and the University of Alberta's Western Centre for Economic Research both released reports on how businesses view the upcoming quarter and year. Both are showing less confidence in future business activity but are still optimistic.

"Certainly this suggests that (slowdown) means a slower pace of growth, a moderate pace of growth. It still suggests growth, but at a more measured pace," said Ted Chambers, research professor with the Western Centre for Economic Research.

A weaker oil and gas industry is to blame for much of the reduced growth, said Chambers. The slowest anticipated growth is in southern Alberta, where natural gas drilling has declined.

With slower growth, retailers will have to change their strategies, said Retail Alberta director Michael Ouellette.

"You cannot expect your customer to walk through the door anymore. You have to market to them."

Justice & Attorney General

Municipal Affairs & Housing

Province forces Capital Region 'to the table'; New 25-member governing board to be responsible for land use, public transit

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: A1 / FRONT

Section: News

Byline: Archie McLean and Susan Ruttan

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: The Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - After more than half a century of regional bickering, the province moved Wednesday to create a governing board for the fractious capital region.

"The time for debate is over. Let's get to the table," Premier Ed Stelmach said in announcing the plan, which accepts nearly all the recommendations from a recent government report by civil servant Doug Radke.

Mayor Stephen Mandel was excited about the development.

"The premier today made history," Mandel said. "I'm absolutely elated.

If there's anything I wanted to accomplish during my time as mayor, it was regional co-operation."

Mandel has pushed for such a regional planning model for more than a year. Edmonton withdrew from the existing regional body, the Alberta Capital Region Alliance, which has no legal power to force any municipality to do anything.

The regional board will have authority over land-use planning and intermunicipal transit. Counties around Edmonton, two of which are in an upgrader-building boom tied to the oilsands, strongly oppose such a body.

But Stelmach said all 25 of the region's municipalities will be part of the new board. For a motion to pass, it will need the support of 17 of 25 municipalities representing at least 75 per cent of the region's population.

The structure essentially gives Edmonton a veto. But Stelmach said it isn't so simple.

"You could look at it as a veto both ways," he said. "It's all about building relationships."

Radke's report called for land-use planning that would apply to developments already approved at the local level, but Stelmach rejected that idea.

"Obviously a lot of effort was put into developing those plans -- they were approved" by local councils, he said, adding that developers have also spent a lot of money on their projects.

The province will provide \$500,000 to kickstart the board, and has committed to funding for three years. It will also appoint a non-voting interim chairperson.

Leduc Mayor Greg Krishke, the only municipal leader on hand for the announcement, said he's pleased with the move.

"You've got to start somewhere, and the board is a good place to begin," he said.

Mandel said a couple of his fellow mayors in the region have already suggested that he and they go for coffee to start talking about the future.

"For the city of Edmonton and the capital region, this is a great day."

Fort Saskatchewan Mayor Jim Sheasgreen said his council supports the new board if it sticks to land-use planning and transportation, and doesn't get into broader issues.

Sheasgreen, who chairs the capital region alliance, said their board will meet in the new year to decide its future. He was optimistic about the new board's chances. "I see no reason why it can't be a success," he said.

Stelmach said he'd like the board up and running by the end of January.

During city council's budget debate on Wednesday, Coun. Don Iveson suggested that municipalities in the region chip in to support the Edmonton Space and Science Foundation, which runs the Telus World of Science. The suggestion was rejected.

The city gives \$1.7 million a year to the foundation.

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Seniors & Community Supports

Service Alberta

Solicitor General & Public Security

Sustainable Resource Development

Tourism, Parks, Recreation & Culture

*Miscellaneous Government

Provincial prosperity too expensive for some small business owners; Third-generation butcher off to Ontario for cheaper rent and available staff

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: E1 / FRONT

Section: Business

Byline: Paul Marck

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: The Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - Alberta's boom is going bust for some small businesses.

Third-generation butcher Mike Noonan of Brothers Quality Meats, a fixture for more than a dozen years in southeast Edmonton, closes his doors for good on Christmas Eve, his shop the victim of new development and the province's crushing skills shortage.

"Don't get me wrong, we're not going broke," says Noonan, whose father and grandfather preceded him in the butcher business, operating Edmonton Meat Packing in the 1970s.

Instead, Noonan is packing up in the New Year and moving to his wife Laurie's hometown of Kingston, Ont., where he will open anew as Noonan's Meat Market. "We're moving there for the opportunity of a smaller city and the ability to hire some staff," says Noonan, 36, who learned the business from the ground up since age 16.

Noonan's shop near Capilano Mall is part of a strip mall that will be demolished next year to make room for a huge new drug store. Existing businesses were given six months notice to vacate. But that just capped a decision Noonan has been mulling for the last couple of years.

"It's not a long enough time to find a new location or contractor," says Noonan, not to mention ponying up expenses for new equipment, refrigerators and all the capital costs associated with a relocation in Edmonton.

Noonan estimates his rent would double wherever he might go in the city, plus he cannot hire help that want to be trained and stick around.

"It doesn't matter what you pay them," says Noonan.

Along with Laurie, his two loyal fulltime employees, James Deans and Kathy Dean, have been with Noonan for a long time. Deans returned just to help him close out the business. But, Noonan says, there is no interest among new hired help to learn the finer points of meat cutting or making sausage. Premium cuts of pork and beef, along with a variety of smoked and cured sausage are among Brothers' specialties.

"Business has been the same. The only difference is that I can't find any help."

Noonan says he can only work so many 14-hour days until midnight before getting totally pooped. It has gotten to the point that a Friday night date with Laurie is sharing a glass of wine or beer after the shop closes, while they make up a batch of kebabs for Saturday's busy crowd.

Sunday, Noonan's only day off, is spent washing down refrigerator tubs.

When he reopens in Ontario, Noonan expects to get a bit of a breather. Plus, his rent will be halved and he has already scoped out the labour scene and knows he can find reliable help for \$11 an hour.

"We're not leaving because we're hurting. We just have better opportunities because it's less expensive."

Coincidentally, not only is Laurie's family from Kingston, Noonan's grandparents met there at the military air base during the war years.

Noonan estimates he has about 4,000 regular customers, from those who frequent his shop a couple of times a week to those he sees only a few times a year.

"The boom hasn't made me any busier," says Noonan. "If anything, I see a lot of my customers less than before because they're all so busy working."

Noonan says his customers are what he will miss most about Edmonton. They have become friends over the last 13 years. "We went to their weddings, and some of them came to ours."

In the early days of Brothers -- and there was a brother, Steve, who decided the butcher business wasn't for him -- Noonan put on a Saturday show to entertain his customers. He juggled knives, and has the scars on his arms to prove it.

"I don't do that kind of stuff anymore. But it was a lot of fun," says Noonan.

Being a virtuoso with sharp blades is part of the trade. "If you're going to rob us, don't bring a knife. I'll just laugh at you," Noonan jokes.

As much as he will miss Edmonton, Noonan says he looks forward to the challenge of re-establishing his new life in Kingston, a picturesque tourist town of 117,207 in the lakes district of Ontario's cottage country.

"It'll be fun to start all over."

Small firms facing problems because of Alberta's boom is becoming a familiar lament to the Canadian Federation of Independent Business.

Janine Halbesma, a senior policy analyst with CFIB's Edmonton branch, said three or four local member companies have told similar stories to Noonan's, in that they are closing up because they can't hire help and owners are tired of working 20-hour days.

"Of course, the boom has been great and it has brought some real challenges for business," said Halbesma. "The labour shortage being number one, rent, energy costs, things like this are really causing challenges for small firms."

A recent survey by the federation in Alberta with 1,437 responses shows that 41 per cent of businesses are ignoring new business opportunities because they are unable to find staff to handle the increase in commerce.

Thirty per cent of respondents say they have delayed expansion plans because they are unable to handle any more new business.

"There's no easy solutions," says Halbesma.

CFIB members would like to see streamlined immigration policies and tax relief to help them out.

They are also hiring more from under-represented areas like people with disabilities or retired and semi-retired to ease the skills crunch.

Businesses also say they would invest any tax savings in training, wages and new equipment to become more competitive, Halbesma said.

"This is about reinvesting in our community to keep their businesses alive and thriving. There really is a whole range of solutions," Halbesma said.

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Witness; Our comment on this week's news

See Magazine

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: 10

Section: Look Bac

Source: See Magazine

ALBERTA - INFORMATION THE PRICE OF DEMOCRACY

\$7000. It's kind of like a democracy surcharge. It's as if the government says, "We'll let you vote for nothing, but accountability is going to cost you extra."

It's nice enough, we guess, that Alberta Energy won't make environmental watchdog Martha Kostuch cough up \$7000 to find out who did what research when about the impact increased royalties would have on the province's coffers. But they wanted to. Only in Alberta could "Freedom of Information" cost so much.

But if these documents can be made public... then why aren't they public already? The Internet has crushed whatever barriers there might once have been to getting the information out. Post PDFs. Let anyone download them. If they need them on paper, they can print them.

Because--take note, Alberta Energy--we've already paid for what's in those documents.

EDMONTON - HOCKEY ARENA DREAMS

There's no denying that central Edmonton is crying out for more traffic congestion. That's just one reason why the idea of a new downtown pro hockey arena has struck a chord with so many.

Of course, some of them are probably also thinking about the "great opportunity to redevelop the province's capital city," as sports economist Mark Rosentraub told the Edmonton Journal on Saturday.

But before anyone gets too excited about Daryl Katz's promise of \$100 million to help build an arena, note that Rosentraub suggests that it's billion-dollar projects that can make economic sense.

And we should probably consider this passage from his 1999 book *Major League Losers*: "The sports welfare system exists because state and local government leaders, dazzled by promises of economic growth... failed to do their homework."

ALBERTA - MEDIA POLITICAL HOTLINE

Far from comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable, Alberta's conservative columnists are invariable more than happy to comfort the comfortable. That will come as a surprise to no one.

Nor would anyone be surprised to learn that a winking relationship exists between some journalists and the province's Conservatives. Some might raise an eyebrow, however, to learn that when the provincial Tories say "bend over," our chattering classes ask only "how cravenly?"

As Jeremy Klaszus reports in *Calgary's Fast Forward*, former *Calgary Sun* editor Paul Jackson wrote a column supporting Jonathan Denis for the Tory nomination in Calgary-Egmont, despite having previously supported Craig Chandler. When Chandler demanded an explanation, Jackson emailed, "I got an urgent call from the premier's office asking me to back Jonathan. What else could I do?"

Busy Albertans go gaga for holiday gift cards; Province leads country in purchases

The Calgary Herald

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: F1 / FRONT

Section: Calgary Business

Byline: Mario Toneguzzi

Source: Calgary Herald

It's no surprise to Margaret Yurchak that Albertans are the most likely consumers in the country to purchase an electronic gift card this Christmas shopping season.

The assistant spa director of Oasis Wellness Centre and Spa in Mount Royal Village has seen the flurry of activity for the cards by Calgary consumers since the beginning of November when the business decided to sell them.

"We launched gift cards as of Nov. 1. We've seen huge success with them," said Yurchak. "Before, we used to have gift certificates and now we don't have an expiry date. (Also) it makes it easy for men to do their Christmas shopping. We also can offer people to buy them online, which we've had great success with."

A new study by Pollara on behalf of the Retail Council of Canada showed, on average, Albertans, at 52 per cent, are the most likely in Canada to shop online for gifts this holiday season and they are the most likely, at 35 per cent, to purchase electronic gift cards as presents.

The retail council survey said 29 per cent of Canadians plan to purchase gift cards as presents this holiday season, which marks an increase of 10 per cent over the past two years.

Age clearly plays a role in the decision to buy a gift card for a loved one as men aged 18 to 34, at 36 per cent, and women aged 18 to 34, at 29 per cent, are more likely to purchase a gift card than Canadians over 55 years old, at 22 per cent.

"The results of this year's annual holiday survey clearly show that Canadians remain confident and the Canadian economy continues to hold strong," said Diane Brisebois, president and CEO of the Retail Council of Canada. "Despite some concerns with the economy south of the border, unemployment numbers and interest rates in Canada remain relatively low."

She said Canadians are planning to spend more this year on gifts.

In Calgary, Yurchak is seeing that every day as people snap up the gift cards at Oasis.

"They're spending anywhere from \$50 to \$1,000," she said, adding the services at the centre range from a manicure to couple's massages and pedicures.

"We can do approximately \$10,000 a day (in gift card sales) right now as the momentum builds towards Christmas here, especially," Yurchak said. "It's crazy, isn't it?"

Recently, the Alberta government said Canadian retailers estimate shoppers will stuff more than \$1.25 billion worth of gift cards into stockings this Christmas.

But the government warned consumers that many of the cards have expiry dates ranging from six months to a year or two after purchase or include fees that can reduce the actual value of the card.

Service Alberta developed some suggestions to ensure consumers get full value from the cards:

- When buying a card, ask about expiration dates and fees. This information may appear on the card itself, on the accompanying sleeve or envelope or on the issuer's website. If you don't see it, ask for it;
- Make sure you get whatever the salesperson tells you in writing. If you're giving the card as a gift, make sure the recipient also knows the terms and conditions;
- Check for any purchase exceptions. For example, can you use a store-specific gift card at the actual store and on the store's website? Can an "all-purpose" card really be used to buy groceries or gasoline?
- Treat gift cards like a credit card. If your card is lost or stolen, report it to the issuer immediately. You may be out the entire amount on the card. Some issuers won't replace cards; others replace them for a fee.

The bottom line about the electronic gift card craze is convenience, said John Torella, senior partner for J.C. Williams Group Ltd. in Toronto.

"Nobody's got the time to do the kind of lallygagging shopping that we used to do in the past," he said.

"With the pressure of 'time poor,' the gift cards are a wonderful solution. It's also a reflection of the challenge, or the paradox, of choice. You've just got so much choice and you sit down and think about people today, especially if it's in the fashion area, how would you ever make a choice? It's so complex."

According to Visa Canada's ninth annual survey conducted by Omnitel and released Wednesday, Alberta holiday shoppers are more likely to buy gift cards and gift certificates for their friends and family. And what do Albertans want to receive? Sixteen per cent of them want cash from Santa, the highest percentage in Canada. Next on the list are gift cards and gift certificates (12 per cent) and electronics (10 per cent).

According to Scotiabank's holiday spending study, giving the gift of choice -- gift cards (17 per cent) -- is once again high on the gift-giving list for Canadians.

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Retail Gift Cards (2003-2005)

- Among six trade groups examined, the proportion of clothing stores offering gift cards showed the biggest gain;
- In 2003, 36 per cent of clothing stores were offering the cards, but by 2005, this had more than doubled to 79 per cent;
- The proportion of supermarkets also jumped from 57 per cent in 2003 to 70 per cent in 2005.
- Statistics Canada said there is yet no estimate of the value of annual sales conducted through gift cards, but the study found that retailers with the largest sales tended to offer gift cards sooner.
- Stores that introduced the gift cards in 2003 had sales that averaged \$11.8 million per store in 2005. This was more than twice the average of \$5 million among the group that had not offered gift cards at that time.

Source: Statistics Canada

***Election**

Ex-Liberal to run as independent

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: B6

Section: Cityplus/Alberta

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: The Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - Former Liberal MLA Dan Backs has announced he will seek re-election in Edmonton-Manning, this time running as an independent.

Backs was booted by Liberal Leader Kevin Taft in November 2006 for not being a team player. He has sat in the legislature as an independent since.

"An independent MLA has greater scope and freedom to represent his constituents than any party MLA in the grip of the party line," Backs said in a release Tuesday announcing his plans.

The northeast riding has bounced between the Liberals, Tories and NDP over the years. Backs won it from Conservative Tony Vandermeer, who took it from the Liberals when Ed Gibbons moved to city council.

Columnists/Editorial & Comment

Liberals the Glass Half-Full Party; Visions of electoral breakthrough in 2008 dancing in their heads this Christmas

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: A18

Section: Opinion

Byline: Graham Thomson

Column: Graham Thomson

Source: The Edmonton Journal

Two-thousand and eight will be a leap year.

However, Alberta Liberals are hoping it will much more than that.

They're hoping it will be a quantum leap year.

For the first time since their near-life experience in the 1993 provincial election, Alberta Liberals feel they're on the verge of an electoral breakthrough -- one that will come during an election expected in the spring.

Call it healthy enthusiasm, call it wild optimism, call it too much rum in the eggnog. Doesn't matter. Liberals are smiling. Or at least they've stopped grimacing so much.

Everything might not be going their way but they've learned to look on the bright side. They should rename themselves the Glass Half-Full Party.

They're still \$400,000 in debt, but that is much better than the \$1-million debt they were saddled with a few years ago. They only have 16 seats in the 83-seat legislature, but they managed to win Ralph Klein's old riding of Calgary-Elbow in last June's byelection.

They still trail the Tories in public opinion polls but ... well, actually, there is no "but" for that one. Liberals have not seen their ratings go up even though the Tories have gone down. Alberta politics apparently is not a see-saw. More like a game of hide and seek. Where are the disgruntled Tory supporters going? We don't know. They aren't saying who'll they'll vote for next election, or even if they'll vote at all.

For Liberals, though, there is a bright side to the disappearing Tory vote, even if the Tories don't switch to Liberals. A collapsing Tory vote would allow the Liberals to win more seats by default, much as they did in Calgary-Elbow.

Liberal Leader Kevin Taft is hopeful the Liberal vote will actually increase, rather than simply hold firm, even though we haven't seen any significant movement against the Tories in public opinion polls.

How does Taft explain his theory? Well, here's his chance.

As I said in an earlier column this week, as an early Christmas present I'm giving the party leaders a chance to make their point in year-end interviews without me editing them down to a 10-word statement.

"I'm skeptical of the polls," says Taft. "Part of what is going on is a big change in the political culture of Alberta. The Alberta Liberals fundamentally aren't up against a political party, they're up against a political culture that's slower to change.

"It's a bigger, slower, glacial process. Before people can plug into the Alberta Liberals, they need to unplug from the Tories.

"And I think that's where that big undecided is right now. I don't believe that we will see the real trends develop until the second half of the (election) campaign itself. ... I just think that that's where voters are.

"I don't think their minds are highly into provincial politics at the moment and it's going to take the campaign to engage them and to force them to think, force them to confront the decision of who they are going to vote for."

While I've got Taft talking, I'd like him to explain the Liberal position on royalty rates which has baffled not only me but just about everyone else within earshot.

We know where the NDP stands, for example. It wants all the recommendations adopted from the Bill Hunter panel on royalties. The government, on the other hand, has adopted a compromise position between what Hunter recommended and what energy companies wanted.

But where do the Liberals stand on the biggest issue in Alberta politics in 2007?

Here again is Taft unedited.

"The position we took is that the bottom line increase in 'take' put forward by the Hunter panel seems eminently reasonable. The details of how you get there, it's incredibly technical.

"If you go on the government website, the Department of Energy website on energy royalties, there are pages and pages of mathematical formulas and considerations and so on. It is a very technical exercise. In my view, it's not an exercise that politicians should be getting into the detail.

"As politicians, you set the object, whether it's building a high-speed rail from Edmonton to Calgary or whatever else you're constructing. But you need to rely on technical experts to help with the details. The government has a department full of people like that and the money to hire whoever else they want. And that's where the sorting out really has to happen."

Or, to edit it down to a 10-word statement: The Liberals don't have an easily understood policy on royalties.

Or, put another way: Liberals will announce a royalty policy if they form government.

The odds against that are stiff.

About the same as a regular leap year turning into a quantum leap year.

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Stelmach's tough stand on region just right

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 20 Dec 2007

Page: B1 / FRONT

Section: Cityplus

Byline: Paula Simons

Column: Paula Simons

Source: The Edmonton Journal

Ed Stelmach says he doesn't want to make threats.

"I'm not the kind of person who wants to use a hammer," says the premier.

But when someone tells you he's not saying something in a threatening way, well -- he actually is. So it was that Stelmach sent the Edmonton region's feuding municipalities a quiet but clear message Wednesday afternoon. He is creating a board to be responsible for land- use planning and infrastructure cost sharing for the capital region. Membership will be mandatory. And that's that.

"I don't expect everyone to agree with every detail of this plan," said Stelmach, in a luncheon speech to the Canadian Club. "But we've been debating this for decades and we no longer have the luxury of debate. We need action."

And with that, the premier announced that he was accepting the vast majority of the recommendations in Doug Radke's controversial report on regional governance. And that's great news, not just for Edmonton and its citizens but for the future economic and environmental health of the greater Edmonton region. The premier has demonstrated that he gets it -- that we have to have a co-ordinated plan to deal with all the upgraders planned for the northeast, that we must have a coherent strategy to exploit the economic potential offered to us by the opening of a new deep-water port at Prince Rupert. We need to work together to tackle everything from public transit to water treatment to affordable housing. And this is our one last chance to do it.

"I don't know anywhere else in the province of Alberta where we have \$88 billion in investment at risk," said Stelmach. Blow this chance, the premier suggested, and we not only squander Edmonton's economic potential, we squander investment that could benefit the entire province.

Under the formula accepted by the premier, all 25 municipalities in the metro-Edmonton area will be represented on a regional planning board. The board's votes will be binding on all members.

In order for any resolution to pass, it will need the support of 17 municipalities representing 75 per cent of the region's population.

That means Edmonton, which has about 72 per cent of the population, will have a de facto veto. But it also means that Edmonton can't pass any resolution it favours unless it forms a working coalition with at least 16 other communities. That won't make for speedy decision making.

There will be a lot of back-room politicking, and mayors of very small municipalities could end up with a lot of clout, holding the balance of power. But we will, at least, have a forum where decisions can be made.

And while there won't be revenue-sharing, the board has been charged to work out a plan to share the costs of regional infrastructure and services. The province will have the power to requisition funds from each municipality to share the cost of regional initiatives.

The premier did diverge from Radke's recommendations in two key areas.

Instead of allowing board members to elect a chair from among themselves, the province will appoint the first chair, an independent outsider. This Solomon-like figure, says the premier, will be fair, knowledgeable about land use planning, experienced at running meetings and available to start work by the middle of January.

This could be a clever strategic stroke by the premier. Relations among some of the region's mayors are so sour, choosing a strong yet objective chair from among them might have proven impossible. But it won't be easy for the premier to find a chair who'll command the respect of all board members. Chairing this board will be like herding cats, and smart, tough cat-herders are always in short supply.

More critically, the premier has watered down one of Radke's boldest recommendations. Radke proposed to give the board the binding power to do land use planning for the region. And Radke wanted that power to be retroactive, so that the board could rewind development projects, already on the books, that might not conform to the board's land use planning principles.

The province, however, balked at going that far. Instead the board will have the power to plan for the future -- but developments already on the books, no matter how much they might deviate from smart urban planning and regional land management, will be grandfathered and allowed to go ahead.

Stelmach says that concession was necessary out of respect for municipalities that have already invested time and effort in local plans -- and out of respect for property developers and their business investments.

It's a compromise that could allow some dubious developments to go ahead, without much respect for the regional needs. However, it was likely the political compromise Stelmach had to make.

The mood was pretty bright at Edmonton City Hall on Wednesday. Stephen Mandel has been fighting for years just to get regional planning on the provincial agenda. He's finally won that battle -- though at City Hall, they were also giving credit to Edmonton Whitemud MLA Dave Hancock for going to the wall to fight for Edmonton's interests. Was Stelmach's announcement an early Christmas present for Edmontonians? Perhaps. But the less seasonal analogy might be to say that Stelmach's made the Capital region's municipalities an offer they can't refuse.

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