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Stelmach sends mixed signals to Red Deer citizens awaiting cancer treatment

Edmonton – Official Opposition Leader David Swann is in Red Deer today to meet with residents and push the Stelmach administration to commit to a completion date for the needed expansion of the Central Alberta Associate Cancer Centre.

The government's list of major Alberta projects indicates that Red Deer's radiation therapy clinic will be constructed by 2013. But the Ministry of Health's five-year action plan, announced later, indicates that the project won't be finished until 2015. Given this inconsistency and the Premier's past inability to finish capital projects on time, Swann is worried that conflicting announcements regarding the expansion will further delay this important project.

Swann raised the issue in Question Period, but couldn't get a straight answer from Finance Minister Ted Morton or Health Minister Gene Zwozdesky:

Dr. Swann: ...To the minister of finance: is it not true that documents on your ministry's website show that the new cancer clinic in Red Deer will be open in 2013?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I don't know what the website says about the cancer clinic in Red Deer, so I'll have to take a look to get an answer to the member there...

Dr. Swann: [The website] does say that the Red Deer cancer clinic will be operable by 2013. However, the five-year plan that was released yesterday by the minister of health reveals that the Red Deer health clinic will be open by 2015. To the minister of health: has the minister deferred the cancer centre in Red Deer, or is the five-year plan wrong?

Mr. Zwozdesky: No, Mr. Speaker. The cancer therapy corridor project for radiation is going ahead. We've already opened a brilliant, beautiful facility in Lethbridge where at least 600 people will be able to benefit from that service in their own community. We've announced that we'll do one in Red Deer as well. There's a design process that has to be worked through, and the Minister of Infrastructure is helping in that regard. So we'll have one in Red Deer as fast as possible...

Dr. Swann: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's really tough to get answers to basic questions in this House. I would hope that we can hold these ministers more accountable in the future. We're getting very mixed messages on this critical area of cancer treatment, and this government continues to prevaricate...

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, we've announced and made it very clear that these projects are moving ahead as quickly as they possibly can...

-Excerpts from *Alberta Hansard*, December 1, 2010

"We've seen this before," Swann says. "Conflicting information and announcements from different ministries, delays and doubletalk...it's the same thing that happened with the Calgary South Health Campus, which was delayed for years and years, and in fact won't be ready for several years yet. This administration's promises aren't worth the paper they're printed on."

Swann, a physician, says that the delays will mean cancer patients will be forced to travel to Edmonton or Calgary for radiation therapy, leading to greater stress and poorer health outcomes.

"Patients should always be treated as close to home as possible," Swann says. "The Stelmach administration should immediately give the people of Red Deer a straight answer on when this clinic will open."

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