

Delayed health projects revived

Calgary cancer centre may be in \$2.5B plan

BY JASON FEKETE, CALGARY HERALD APRIL 24, 2010



Almost all of the hundreds of millions of dollars in deferred health projects -- including several in southern Alberta -- will be funded in the Stelmach government's new capital plan set to be released in the coming weeks, says Health Minister Gene Zwozdesky.

The provincial Tory government is finalizing its list of projects to fund in its new three-year, \$2.5-billion health capital plan, and there's mounting hope a new Calgary cancer centre -- promised five years ago -- will be on it.

Eight major health projects were postponed in last year's budget, including several new nursing homes, the North Calgary Diagnostic and Treatment Centre, and Edmonton hospital upgrades. At least six more planned facilities were being reviewed for possible changes in scope.

Zwozdesky said his new capital plan will almost certainly have funding for most -- if not all -- of the projects that have been deferred.

"I'm quite confident we'll be able to address either all or the vast majority of all of those as part of our three-year funding plan," the minister said in an interview, noting some projects may be stretched over a fourth or fifth year.

"We have to start with going back and looking at the commitments that were already made and address those first."

Zwozdesky was slated to unveil the list of projects by the end of March, but wants to tour a few more facilities across the province before getting financial blessing from the Treasury Board committee.

As Alberta's population has exploded over the past few years, so, too, has the need for health facilities, with new hospitals in Grande Prairie, Medicine Hat and rural Alberta desperately needed.

But with the growing demands comes heightened competition among cities and towns that insist new or upgraded health facilities are critical if their communities are to thrive.

The wants, however, far outweigh the dollars available.

"There are far more requests before us than we can possibly handle," the minister added.

Government data indicate the percentage of health facilities considered in poor condition is set to triple this year, at a time the province is projecting a record \$4.7-billion deficit.

For Calgary, one of the most pressing capital priorities is replacing the Tom Baker Cancer Centre, a facility that ran out of capacity nearly seven years ago.

"The government is abandoning Calgary if they don't go through with this cancer centre," said former Calgary Health Region board member Mairi Matheson. "It's a basic need. We need this in Calgary."

Matheson was ousted two years ago when the Stelmach government imploded the regional health authorities and replaced them with Alberta Health Services, the single health authority based in Edmonton. She insists AHS "are not the least interested in Calgary" and far too focused on counting dollars and cents.

While the cancer centre hasn't been included in the province's capital plan, the former Klein government promised a new facility five years ago, although the Tory regime has yet to fulfil that pledge.

Premier Ed Stelmach said in March that a new Calgary cancer centre "is a priority" for his government -- something Zwozdesky reaffirmed this week -- despite the medical superbord previously saying the project won't be included in the list of projects.

Opposition party leaders said Albertans are growing tired of the government failing to live up to its health commitments and worry the decisions are based on political expediency rather than community need.

"People are getting a little bit of fatigue with the two steps forward, two steps back," argued Wildrose Alliance Leader Danielle Smith. "You've got to start following through."

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Smith believes new long-term care facilities must be on the government list, because too many seniors are stationed in hospitals when the province is already short of acute-care beds.

Liberal Leader David Swann said building a Calgary cancer centre is a top priority for his party. He wants the government to tap the multibillion-dollar rainy day Sustainability Fund to construct more facilities -- and live up to its promises -- while project costs remain at bargain-basement levels.

"It does seem to me there are reasons to be quite angry, that after such announcements the government has been able to backtrack," Swann said.

In Medicine Hat, residents still await a \$280-million hospital expansion that was promised by the Stelmach government just before the 2008 provincial election campaign. And in Grande Prairie, people are hoping government will cough up its promised \$250 million for a new facility to replace the aging and cramped Queen Elizabeth II Hospital.

Also deferred were the Barrhead health centre and long-term care facilities in Didsbury, Lacombe and Fort McMurray. Three projects in Edmonton, including a pediatric emergency room expansion project, were also postponed.

Carol Secondiak, past chairwoman of the former Palliser Health Region, said Medicine Hat's hospital is simply "swamped" trying to meet the needs of both a burgeoning city and other communities such as Brooks.

A new hospital is "long overdue," she said, and area residents are losing patience with the Tory government.

"There's a bit of disillusionment with the promises that have been made," Secondiak said. "It (a new hospital) would go a long way to repairing some of the political damage."

In Grande Prairie, former provincial Tory campaign manager Marv Moore urged the government to borrow money to help reduce the backlog of needed health facilities, while project costs and interest rates are low.

Moore, the former chairman of the region's health board, said Grande Prairie's hospital simply can't handle the needs of more than 200,000 people in northwest Alberta and northeast B.C.

He's calling on Stelmach to live up to his promise of a few years ago to build a new hospital.

"Anytime the premier makes an announcement like that and doesn't come through, there's disappointment," Moore said. "It would mean a great deal."

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