

President's Perspective on the 2007-2008 Budget

We have been made aware that the Ghiz government will be tabling its Capital Budget on Friday November 2, 2007. I am sure that its contents will warrant a comment or two but at this time I would like to respond to the Budget that was tabled in the House on October 16, 2007.

This document failed to produce any major changes in priorities from the previous government's budget. This was disappointing considering they had waited ten years for the opportunity to show us what they would do. As is the usual practice in government, the one in power blames it's inability to fulfill it's promises because of the financial ruin that the previous government left for them to clean up. This government is proving to be no different.

The budget includes the already introduced tax cuts/freezes on gas and residential taxes. This came as no surprise to anyone. Islanders of all political stripes and income levels welcome tax relief. We also expect our elected officials to ensure the continuous delivery of social programs and health services. These services are funded by tax dollars. We will be watching to ensure that this government has not moved too quickly on its promise of "Tax Fairness for Islanders" without fully considering the ongoing and increasing need for quality public services and programs.

There are some good initiatives in this budget. The reinstatement of the Provincial Health Recruiter position is a positive step. It is reassuring to see that this government realizes the staff shortages in Health are not only in the areas of Doctors and Registered Nurses, but that shortages exist in all areas of health care service delivery. A Doctor and a R.N. can not single-handedly deliver health care. Their efforts are supported and enhanced by a team of trained Professionals who work diligently on behalf of Islanders.

The additional dollars allocated to the Seniors Drug Program is far from what the program needs to allow it to be comprehensive, but it is a step in the right direction. Any efforts that result in easing the financial hardship of our senior population is a welcome one. The same is true for the Disability Support Program. The elimination of the means test for parents of disabled children will allow all disabled children the right to equitable access to public services and programs. The allocation of funds to create additional Speech Language Pathologists positions is also welcome news.

The budget also allowed additional dollars for highway maintenance. Let's hope some of these dollars are utilized to allow for an increase to the weeks of work offered to employees, and to address the wage issues that are a major factor in the recruitment and retention problem with skilled trades workers and equipment operators.

Surrounding the budget address the current and former Ministers of Industry were both quick to take credit for their efforts in securing the presence of large IT companies like Ceridian and Tri-mark. They proudly informed Islanders that they were generous in their financial support to these private companies. The Liberals state that they renegotiated the deals put in place by the previous Conservative government and secured a better deal for Islanders. The IT workers who barely survived the previous government's infamous, and very ill planned IT Optimization Project, have every right to be both insulted and angry. The former government went out of its way to ensure the private IT companies had a waiting workforce when they set up shop on PEI. They went so far as to lay off Public Service IT employees. They regrouped the ones that they retained and reassigned their job duties. They did not improve so much as the work environment for these employees. Many of the IT workers have offices in old outdated buildings where health and safety issues are constantly being identified. It's ironic to listen to the Minister talk about the modern facilities that are being built (with the assistance of Islander's tax dollars) for a private business when some of its own employees work in sub standard conditions.

The budget has also allocated additional funds for tourism advertising and marketing strategies. The Premier has not changed his opinion that the courses should be sold. The budget indicates the golf courses in this province are running at a deficit. Perhaps the Premier should try a year or two of increasing the marketing strategies and advertising dollars for the Island's golf courses, before he sells them off. These courses currently employ many Islanders. These people serve as ambassadors for the Island. They maintain these golf courses at a level that keeps them ranked amongst the best in North America. You can be assured that UPSE will continue to look out for the members who rely on these courses for employment, and ensure that whatever decisions the government makes regarding the golf courses, the members rights will be protected.

The budget also includes an allocation of dollars for the recruitment of persons aged 55-64. We are all well aware that this age group represents a large portion of the population that is available for work. Unfortunately this effort is no more than a band-aid solution. We can not properly plan for the future of service and program delivery if we do not have a proper succession plan in place. The Government failed to partner this initiative with one that is directed at attracting our young people - upon whom the future of this province is dependant - to consider a future in the Civil Service. Much like its predecessor, this Government has failed to develop a proactive plan of action to deal with this reality.

This budget has failed to identify and address many of the issues that UPSE sees as priorities. Our largest component, the Civil Service Employees, are currently in contract negotiations with the province. They too are dealing with a variety of very complex and diverse issues. How the government advises its negotiators to address these issues may be an indication of things to come.

Shelley Ward