

Tuition hike smaller than expected

Conservatives cut funding slightly in provincial budget

BY CINDY CAMERON

Nine students braved rain and freezing temperatures before the Thursday night budget presentation to peacefully protest the rising cost of education.

Rallying in front of Province House, the students greeted arriving politicians with a dummy burdened by massive debt load. However the real protest took place inside, with the opposition lashing out at the government not doing enough to enhance PEI's health and education systems.

Pat Mella's budget held few surprises. Despite a 63 percent increase in tourism revenues and what Opposition Leader Robert Morrissey called a 'windfall' in federal government transfer payments, the Conservative government stuck to a restrained plan for expenditures in the next year.

For UPEI students, this means tuition will increase again next year, though the exact size of the increase is still to be determined.

Mella used some of the extra \$31 million received from the federal government to decrease the current deficit. This deficit will be \$9.2 million this year, down 46 percent from her original projection.

In her address, the Provincial Treasurer placed a high priority on education and health care. The Conservative government pledged undertake much-needed repairs and construction in Island schools. And Mella did not ignore the needs of UPEI students.

"We have increased the allocated funding to UPEI to assist in keeping tuition lower," she said.

Prior to the budget, the treasurer met with UPEI President Elizabeth Epperly and University officials who requested extra funding from government in order to com-

bat another tuition increase. The government decided to grant their request.

"I think we have supported [post-secondary education] as much as we can at this point," Mella said. "Once we have a balanced budget, we will be able to allocate more funds. But we're not out of the woods yet."

But critics of the Conservatives budget say they could have done a lot more for PEI's health and education systems.

"This budget is a hollow document, poverty-stricken in ideas," Opposition Leader Robert Morrissey said, pointing to cuts in funding for acute care facilities and hospitals and post-secondary institutions.

Representatives from UPEI Student Union Executive were similarly unpressed, grilling MLA's following Mella's presentation.

Jamy-Ellen Proud, Vice President Internal, says the UPEI administration has already streamlined its expenditures as much as possible, so more cuts would put many services in jeopardy:

"There have already been cuts to departments like Fine Arts and Classics. The health centre is in danger. There is nothing left to cut. They can only increase tuition."

Student Union VP Finance Stephen Ramsay was also not very happy with Government's efforts.

"We are still getting cut, but maybe not as much," Ramsay said.

Mella and Gillan were unable to sway the students, despite their claims that previous government overstepping and federal government transfer cuts were the root of the problem.

"We're doing the best we can," Mella said.

UPEI administration agreed, saying that they were pleasantly surprised by the budget.

The University was expecting to have its funding from the province cut by four percent which would have meant a nine percent tuition increase next year.

UPEI's operating grant was still cut by the province, but not as much as expected.

The extra funding is likely to decrease the size of the tuition hike, but the overall funding for the university is still slightly lower than was received last year.

"There is still a tuition increase but a relatively low one, lower than last year," Vice President Academic John Crossley said. The exact size of that increase will be de-

termined on April 15.

The administration applauded the efforts of students in making their concerns heard. Crossley says he has heard other administrators give the Student Union lobbying much of the credit for the funding.

"It was done because students needed to have lower tuition and the students made that clear," Crossley said.



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