



Street Talk column October, 2006

Conservative Leadership Candidates Respond – Question Two

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Conservative leadership hopefuls comment on affordable transportation

This fall, Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) is offering all Conservative leadership candidates the opportunity to comment on three poverty-related issues, including possible policy solutions to help address these issues. Responses to the first question on homelessness and affordable housing were published in the September issue of Street Talk.

For the October installment we focus on the issue of affordable transportation. The lack of affordable transportation is often cited as a key barrier to employment and social participation for many low-income Albertans.

The City of Calgary's funding of the Low Income Transit Pass program is scheduled to end December 31, 2006. If sustainable funding is not secured before then, Calgarians living on low incomes may no longer be able to purchase a monthly transit pass at \$35, currently half the regular cost. To date, 8,500 Calgarians have registered for the pass.

We asked candidates, if elected, would they provide conditional grants to municipalities to support affordable transportation for low income Albertans.

The following is what hopefuls had to say. Dr. Ted Morton had not responded by the deadline. Recently declared candidates Victor Doerksen and Gary McPherson will be asked to participate in the third installment.

Alana DeLong

Affordable transportation encourages participation in the community, providing access to employment, friends and family, places of worship, medical appointments and recreational activities. I believe affordable transportation options should exist for every Albertan and as Premier would provide conditional transportation grants to municipalities. I have been involved and a supporter of Fair Fares since working on the MLA-led Low Income Review in 2001. As Premier, I would move forward with their proposed transportation grant system for low-income Albertans. The conditional grant proposal will work in rural and urban areas, providing those with low incomes, much needed affordable transportation.

Jim Dinning

I agree that the lack of affordable transportation is a key barrier for many Albertans. But I'm not a strong supporter of conditional grants determined and set by the provincial government. Municipalities and communities are in the best position to identify and address their needs. If conditional grants are set by the provincial government, then they're the ones setting the priorities and deciding how much money gets spent on affordable transportation. The job of

the provincial government is to provide municipalities with sufficient resources to meet their own local needs and priorities, including the need for affordable transportation.

Dave Hancock

Removing barriers to success for low-income Albertans – to ensure they have the opportunity to participate not only in the economic life but also as full citizens in the community – is very important. Transportation is often cited as such a barrier. Whether through grants to municipalities, working with municipalities in other ways, or directly with individuals and families involved to ensure appropriate support levels, this is a strategic way to build stronger families and communities.

Mark Norris

Affordable transportation and accessibility is very important for low income Albertans and for Albertans with mobility challenges. Every community in Alberta is unique, and different approaches to providing affordable and accessible transportation work in different places. This is why later this fall I will be proposing a detailed plan suggesting that the Province vacate the education portion of property taxes and allow municipalities to use that tax room to best address their local needs. Along with this taxing ability municipalities would be expected to take on more responsibility for the services they already have jurisdiction over. Our communities must be empowered to make the right decisions for them, decisions that address their unique situation. Currently the Province provides unconditional transportation grants to municipalities for things like road maintenance, public transit, and affordable transportation.

Affordable transportation is less of a problem in larger centres, where public transit is available and is cheaper to deliver than in smaller communities. While on the campaign trail, I often hear that rural communities simply cannot afford the costs of providing such a service to their residents. This often leads to serious accessibility concerns, whether for medical services, education or a commute to work.

Again, I know it is difficult to please everyone but I firmly believe that enabling our communities to make decisions locally in a way that best addresses their unique challenges is the right way to go forward. This cannot be achieved if the province always tells local governments how they can and cannot spend your tax dollars.

Dr. Lyle Oberg

I believe it is the role of the Provincial government to help enable all Albertans to succeed, regardless of where they live, and take into account any disabilities or disadvantages they may face. Local governments however, are often closest to understanding local priorities. An Oberg led government would reform the relationship between the Province and Municipalities to enable local governments to better react on a sustainable basis to the social pressures in their community.

I have stated clearly and unequivocally that if elected Premier, I would move to phase out the collection of the portion of property taxes which currently goes to the Provincial government, leaving that room for local governments to manage. This phasing out process could be accomplished over two years, and would leave significant sources of revenue for local governments to plan for the challenges they face. This would include the issue of offering affordable transportation for low-income Albertans.

While businesses in Alberta are actively seeking employees, it is often difficult for them to find affordable transportation to get to those jobs. Many of the job locations are on the edges of our cities and the public transit systems, which are growing, (but not at the pace of the economy) struggle to keep up with the demand for new routes. Other solutions and options for regional transportation must also be explored, whether they are regional bus or rail services. This way, affordable transportation needs can be met while also limiting the impact of our economic growth on the environment.

Ed Stelmach

As a former Minister of Transportation, I know that affordable, available and efficient transportation is a critical issue for all Albertans. Without a car or a license, or access to available public transit, a person's opportunities are limited to participate in the economy and to get services that improve their quality of life.

I have always said that the transportation sector provides the necessities of life, and is the economic enabler that creates the wealth governments' tax to fund public services.

Who most relies on public transit services depends on the community, but generally people with low income, seniors, students, or those with a physical disability. There are also those Albertans who have lost their driver's license as a result of drinking and driving or excessive speeding.

With respect to public transit, the conditional grants the Province transferred to municipalities for things like transit or policing, or ambulance were eliminated a number of years ago in response to a request by municipalities. Municipalities argued that they could manage better if all grants were lumped together into one big grant. Prior to reinstating conditional grants, the Province must work with municipalities to establish whether they wish to reverse their position on conditional grants

The provision of public transit requires a partnership with municipalities and a commitment to planning that is conducive to making transit more viable, affordable and efficient. For those with special needs, I would consider arrangements for operating and capital assistance for special vehicles.

In November, VCC will ask candidates about their views on low wages and the working poor.

(Ramona Johnston is Manager of Vibrant Communities Calgary, a local non-profit poverty-reduction organization. For more information about affordable transportation and Fair Fares, please visit <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2s21.html>)

