

IN THE NEWS:

- THE PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE ASSOCIATION OF ALBERTA WILL HOLD A LEADERSHIP ELECTION ON NOVEMBER 25 AND DECEMBER 2 (IF A SECOND BALLOT IS NEEDED).
- ON SEPTEMBER 20, A CIVIC STANDING POLICY COMMITTEE AGREED TO CONTINUE FUNDING THE UNIVERSAL LOW INCOME TRANSIT PASS IN CALGARY FOR AT LEAST ONE MORE YEAR.

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# VCC in motion!



VOLUME 2, ISSUE 4

SPECIAL EDITION FALL 2006

## SPECIAL EDITION FALL 2006:

### Conservative Leadership Hopefuls Speak on Poverty Issues



Over the past several months Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) has been offering all Conservative leadership candidates the opportunity to comment on three high profile poverty-related issues, including possible policy solutions to help address these issues. Results were published in the September, October and November editions of Calgary Street Talk, with each month highlighting a different question.

VCC is now pleased to offer our partners and stakeholders all responses collected in this special edition of the *VCC in motion!* Fall 2006 Newsletter.

## Affordable Housing and Homelessness

Approximately one in four Calgarians are spending more than 30 per cent of their income on housing and the recent City of Calgary 2006 Biennial Count of Homeless Persons revealed there are 3,436 homeless in the City of Calgary, a 32 per cent increase since the last count conducted in 2004.

We asked candidates, if elected, what are their plans to address the need for affordable housing and homelessness in Alberta. The following is what hopefuls had to say. Dr. Lyle Oberg and Dr. Ted Morton did not provide responses to this question.

### Jim Dinning

Thirty-four-hundred-plus homeless Calgarians—including 145 homeless families—is a problem that must not be ignored. For those in poverty—or even on the cusp of poverty—the struggle to improve their situation gets more difficult as costs—for almost everything, including housing—rise out of sight.

One of my volunteer activities is with the Calgary United Way's Sustained Poverty Reduction Initiative (SPRI). It's a local initiative that takes community-based action to reduce poverty in Calgary.

As a Conservative, I believe in supporting folks to achieve greater independence. At the United Way, we're focused on efforts that will increase the amount of affordable housing; promote community economic development through micro development initiatives; focus on kids who are living in poverty; reduce policy and procedural barriers; and build public awareness and citizen engagement. The government should do the same thing as part of a comprehensive plan.

Thirty-four-hundred-plus homeless Calgarians—including 145 homeless families—is a problem that must not be ignored—Jim Dinning

This is an important social issue we must address—Dave Hancock

I propose a “Premiers Council” be struck to review our current support levels and forward suggestions on how to improve our involvement—Mark Norris

Over the long term, we need to work with municipalities, the private sector and not-for-profit organizations to develop a long term plan that meets the future needs of our communities—Ed Stelmach

Specifically on affordable housing, I'd reach out to the Calgary Homeless Foundation, the United Way and other agencies province wide. I'd work with them to build a plan, one that sees sustained, predictable, multi-year funding from all three levels of government and engages the home builders in Alberta in building and operating affordable homes.



### Dave Hancock

Alberta's robust economy continues to draw people here in record numbers. Our unprecedented population growth has created a growing and vibrant province, but it is also putting a strain on virtually every aspect of our society. Of particular concern is the growing number of homeless people in Alberta. This is an important social issue we must address.

The problem of homelessness is different from that of the past. What we already had to deal with in terms of persons with mental

health or other personal barriers affecting their ability to obtain safe, affordable accommodation now includes the working poor.

What is the solution? Our government needs to do a number of things. First, we must engage those working in this field to develop effective solutions for both the short and long term. Two areas I would focus on include income support and/or supplementary assistance to help individuals and their families overcome their financial barriers, as well as working with municipalities and developers to increase our province's housing capacity so there is affordable housing available to meet the demand resulting from population growth.

Secondly, we need to do more to ensure that assistance programs are not so rules based as to be ineffective. Programs must be flexible so we achieve the outcomes we seek as opposed to being costly to run and hard to access by those who need them most. The key is greater collaboration between the province, local municipalities and community organizations, together with appropriate resources and outcome measures.

### Mark Norris

Under a Norris government, we would ensure proper funding for existing programs specific to low-income housing was budgeted for and paid out.

Further, I want to increase the amount of money available to developers to create more affordable housing and make sure they adhere to the “market rate less 10%” rule. This problem is province wide and severely affects our ability to attract and retain badly needed workers.

With regards to the homeless situation, I propose a “Premiers Council” be struck to review our current support levels and forward suggestions on how to improve our involvement.

### Ed Stelmach

There is a need for helping those in our communities that fall on hard times. There is also a need to provide affordable housing so that more people can find appropriate accommodation, and can afford to make other healthy choices.

The rapid growth of our economy is fuelling property inflation that is felt everywhere and is causing acute social problems in many Alberta communities.

*Affordable Housing and Homelessness con't...*

The housing market is in a temporary imbalance and an immediate provision of affordable housing will help the supply of housing catch up with demand and reduce speculation in the housing market. It is critical that we find immediate shelter for people living in our communities without a home or a place to sleep.

Government must also speed up provision of long term care and assisted living accommodation to help those seniors who are ready to move into these facilities. This may help to put more homes on the market.

Over the long term, we need to work with municipalities, the private sector and not-for-profit organizations to develop a long term plan that meets the future needs of our communities.

It is so important that there are organizations like Vibrant Communities that are community-driven, local organizations that can best help identify and meet local needs.

## Affordable Transportation

As of September, the City of Calgary's funding of the Low Income Transit Pass program was scheduled to end December 31, 2006. If an additional year of funding was not secured, Calgarians living on low incomes would not have been able to purchase a monthly transit pass at \$35, currently half the regular cost. To date, 8,500 Calgarians have registered for the pass. A long-term solution is still being pursued.

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 did not respond to this question.

### 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.



“My life in the city is a lot easier with the Low Income Transit Pass. It ensures I can attend medical appointments, social events and helps me meet my family’s other basic needs. Having the pass is very valuable for me”—  
*Calgarian Living on Low Income*

*Affordable Transportation can't...*

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While businesses in Alberta are actively seeking employees, it is often difficult for them to find affordable transportation to get to those jobs—Dr. Lyle Oberg

I know that affordable, available and efficient transportation is a critical issue for all Albertans—Ed Stelmach

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



 Members of the Fair Fares Action Team stand on the steps of the Alberta Legislature Building in Edmonton. The group made a presentation on affordable transportation to the Provincial Standing Policy Committee on Education and Employment in September.

*Affordable Transportation con't...*

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.

## Low Wages and the Working Poor

The rising cost of living in Alberta is beginning to take its toll. Approximately 50 per cent of Calgarians accessing emergency shelter housing are working full time and despite the thriving economy, many low wage workers are struggling to meet the increasing cost of living in their communities.

We asked candidates, if elected, what policies and programs they would put in place to address the issue of the working poor.

The following is what hopefuls had to say. Victor Doerksen and Dr. Ted Morton did not respond to this question. Although recently announced candidate Gary McPherson did not comment on specific policies or programs, he did say he was exploring ways and initiatives that would provide direct benefit and relief to low income Albertans.



### **Jim Dinning**

Government has an important role to play in supporting people when they need it, whether they are people who are living with disabilities, who need to enhance their skills to get and keep jobs, or who need help with child care. That means working directly with communities and community agencies to expand affordable housing, improve access to health care, increase training/education opportunities and make sure people have access to affordable transportation.

Education is also key to economic success for individuals and our province. I want to develop the most highly skilled and best-educated workforce in North America by increasing the percentage of students who finish high school, and making sure there's space in Alberta's colleges, technical institutes, universities, and apprenticeship programs. It also means bringing more disabled Albertans into full employment by removing barriers, expanding training, and establishing a new relationship with organizations working on behalf of disabled people. I will also

*Low Wages and the Working Poor can't...*

Government has an important role to play in supporting people when they need it, whether they are people who are living with disabilities, who need to enhance their skills to get and keep jobs, or who need help with child care—Jim Dinning

We must enable Albertans to maximize their potential, take care of themselves and their families, and contribute back to their community as full citizens at the highest level of their ability—Dave Hancock

In my travels, it has become obvious that the Alberta Advantage is not being enjoyed by all Albertans and a primary goal of a Norris government would be to correct that—Mark Norris

I believe that government should enable all Albertans to benefit from the current prosperity in the province—Dr. Lyle Oberg

I believe the measurement of a society is how well we take care of those in need—Ed Stelmach

establish the Alberta Aboriginal Education Council to advise on innovative approaches to bridge the gap for Aboriginal students, improve high school completion rates, expand immediate and short term training, and encourage more Aboriginal youth to go on to post-secondary education and training.

Clearly there's a lack of affordable housing in many communities experiencing high growth. I will work with community agencies to build a plan – one that sees sustained, predictable, multi-year funding from all three levels of government and engages the home builders in Alberta in building and operating affordable homes. These are not the only answers, but they're a start.

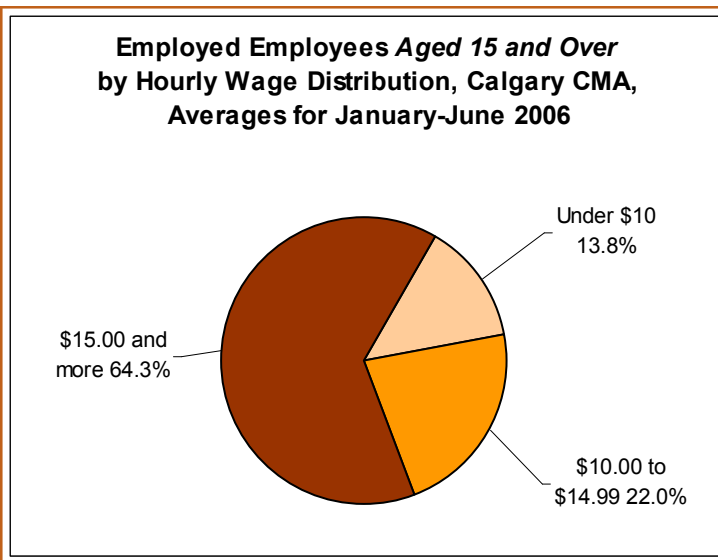
**Dave Hancock**

A booming economy means increasing costs of living, and we must continue to ensure that those less fortunate have the opportunity to live in dignity. A Dave Hancock government would ensure that social programs are designed to help those who need it when they need it, while always providing opportunities and incentives for people to move on and succeed without those programs as soon as, and whenever possible.

We must enable Albertans to maximize their potential, take care of themselves and their families, and contribute back to their community as full citizens at the highest level of their ability. Currently 40 per cent of Albertans do not have the reading and writing skills needed to participate fully at work or in the community.

A Dave Hancock government would: Reward people through tax credits for pursuing an education and applying their training within the province over the long-term; adopt a literacy strategy as developed and promoted by Literacy Alberta and others engaged in Adult Education; target a 50 per cent reduction in Albertans at Level 1 and 2 literacy over the next

seven years; ensure that all Albertans have access to high quality health care in a timely way, regardless of ability to pay; encourage volunteerism as the basis for vibrant communities and ensure overall community safety. The province must establish and fund a central volunteer screening system of thorough, timely police information checks and also provide a cost effective third party personal liability insurance system for all voluntary and vibrant community groups.



(Chart: Data source—Stats Canada)

**Mark Norris**

In my travels, it has become obvious that the Alberta Advantage is not being enjoyed by all Albertans and a primary goal of a Norris government would be to correct that.

To that end, we have proposed two policy ideas:

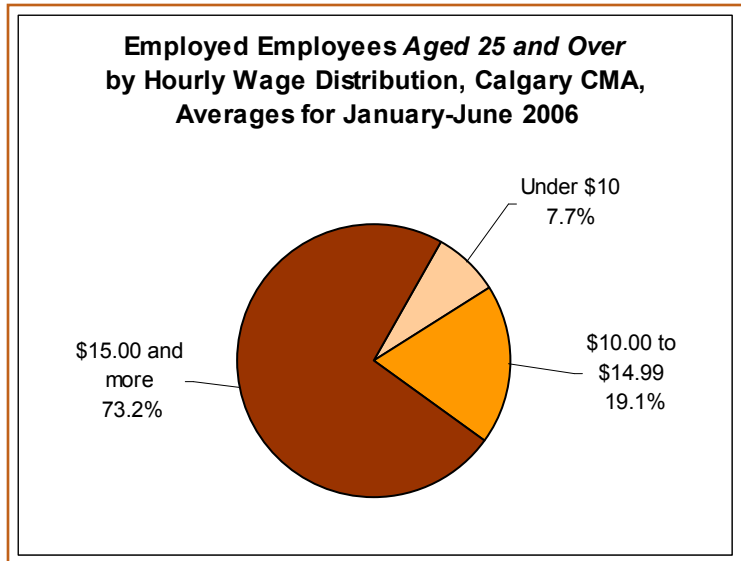
*Low Wages and the Working Poor con't...*

First, we will eliminate the health care premium for households making under \$60,000.

Second, we will raise the basic tax exemption from \$15,000 to \$30,000 meaning Albertans will not be taxed on their first \$30,000 of income leaving them more money at the end of the day.

**Dr. Lyle Oberg**

There are numerous ways that the Government of Alberta can help the working poor. I believe that government should enable all Albertans to benefit from the current prosperity in the province. An Oberg Government will achieve this a few different ways.



(Chart: Data source—Stats Canada)

First, I will eliminate healthcare premiums for all Albertans. By eliminating this regressive tax, each Albertan will save \$528 per year, and many of those people who will benefit could be classified as working poor.

Secondly, an Oberg Government will reduce small business taxes. This will provide owners with additional income for capital reinvestment and expansion, resulting in job creation and increased labour force stability, leaving them more money to pay the necessary wages to attract new workers.

Thirdly, I will reduce personal income taxes 1 per cent for every \$10 billion invested into the Heritage Savings Trust Fund. The ultimate objective would be to eliminate personal income tax. Taken together, these tax reduction initiatives will leave more money in the hands of working Albertans.

Finally, I believe that access to affordable regional transportation is critical. Alberta is growing tremendously and our transit systems must keep pace with our growth. Many Albertans rely on the transit system to commute to work, yet some of the new jobs are in areas not well served by public transit. An Oberg Government will explore how to make regional transit systems work more effectively, which will help working people trying to get to jobs.

**Ed Stelmach**

A booming economy does not help all Albertans. There is a price of prosperity associated with our growth. I believe the measurement of a society is how well we take care of those in need.

As part of my plan to tackle growth pressures, I will provide new, predictable and long term funding to all municipalities. It is crucial municipalities have the resources needed to build and maintain essential services like water, sewage, roads and affordable housing.

I know municipalities need leadership to address housing and regional planning issues. Low vacancy rates and the rising cost of living create social issues that affect our schools and health facilities. Doing what's right means getting on top of these issues quickly.

As leader, I will address housing and infrastructure issues by establishing a task group of elected representatives, school boards, industry, health regions and the Urban Development Institute. The task group will have 45 days to propose cost effective solutions to the acute shortage of affordable housing across Alberta. My values are about sharing with the larger community. I recently announced my Community Spirit Program that pays tribute to the voluntary sector that is so important to a civil society. I will establish a fund from surplus resource revenues that would provide matching grants for philanthropic donations to Alberta-based charitable projects and educational foundations that contribute to the quality of life of Albertans and provide services to those in need.



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Vibrant Communities is a Pan-Canadian Learning Community convened and supported by The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Tamarack - An Institute for Community Engagement, and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Nationally, Vibrant Communities provides a process and a working environment where diverse community leaders from fourteen communities across Canada work together to share ideas, practices and policies that strengthen their community-based poverty reduction initiatives. For more information, please visit:

[www.vibrantcommunities.ca](http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca)

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*tives Society*  
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Becki McKee, *Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary*  
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