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## **\$550,00 and nothing to show for it**

Bills pile up as government dithers on new house for lieutenant-governor

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If you think the price of real estate in Edmonton couldn't be more ridiculously expensive, you should know that in Old Glenora there's a non-existent home that cost \$550,000.

And you, dear taxpayer, have paid for it.

The mailing address, if there was a mailbox, would be 58 St. George's Crescent. But there is nothing at that address except a dusting of fresh snow in an empty lot. You can go see for yourself. Or go and not see for yourself, if you get my point.

That empty lot is supposed to be the location of the new official residence of Alberta's lieutenant-governor. However, on Tuesday the Alberta government postponed construction plans indefinitely, blaming escalating costs.

That postponement comes with a price. So far, the government has spent \$380,000 on design and consultants. If you add in cancellation fees for contractors, the cost to taxpayers will be around \$550,000 -- but could be \$600,000 or higher.

Remember, that's not the cost of the lot. The government already owned the land. That \$550,000 is the cost of the "empty" in empty lot. If that's not enough to make a taxpayer weep, shed a tear when you realize the government could have renovated the old official residence for \$400,000 in 2004.

That's what critics and historical buffs urged the government to do, pointing out back then the 50-year-old cedar bungalow that sat at 58 St. George's Crescent and served as the official lieutenant-governor's residence was designed by one of Edmonton's most important architects, John Rule.

But government officials described the old building as a "money pit" and said spending \$400,000 on renovations would be a waste of money. So, the building was demolished.

In 2005, the government said it would spend \$2.3 million on a new residence. To give Lt.-Gov. Normie Kwong a place to hang his vice-regal hat, the government bought a neighbouring house to be used as a temporary residence while construction began down the street on the permanent home.

By 2006, the estimated cost of building the official residence had risen to \$5.3 million, even though shovel had never met earth. This year, the estimate had jumped to \$8 million, according to Infrastructure Minister Luke Ouellette.

"I don't really think that it's necessary at this time," Ouellette told reporters when he explained why the government wouldn't spend the money. "I don't think we have to keep going out and building more things at a time when escalation costs are still in their double-digit figures. And I think we can just put it on hold for now and regroup."

Ouellette doesn't know how much the cancellation will end up costing taxpayers. But there's already a political price to pay.

Ouellette and the government are caught in a no-win situation, much to the delighted outrage of the opposition.

If the construction had gone ahead, more than a few Albertans would have been annoyed with the government for spending \$8 million on a fancy home for the Queen's representative at a time when the province has a growing homeless problem. At the same time, though, the government is now open to criticism for throwing \$550,000 away with nothing to show for it, not even a hole in the ground.

And there will be those who will criticize the government for spending millions of dollars to renovate the Lougheed mansion in Calgary but failing to build a proper vice-regal residence in the provincial capital.

This whole issue has been a screw-up for the government going back to 2000 when it failed to look after the original residence in the first place. The government missed a chance to renovate the house when the lieutenant-governor at the time, Lois Hole, decided to remain in her St. Albert home to look after her sick husband rather than move into the official residence.

We're left paying the price of government neglect. However, there is one alternative that nobody is talking about. We already have a building that was custom built for the job. It's called Government House, the stately mansion next door to the provincial museum.

It was the official residence of the lieutenant-governor until 1938, when

then-premier Bill Aberhart got into a constitutional fight with Lt.-Gov. John Bowen and in a fit of pique cut off power and heat to the building.

Aberhart lost the constitutional fight but won the battle to force Bowen to move out.

The building sat empty until 1942 and went through various incarnations, including a home for disabled veterans. It is now used for government conferences and receptions, including a meeting place for government caucus.

Ouellette, though, has no plans to turn it back into the vice-regal residence.

"It's not just as easy as snapping your fingers and saying, 'Oh, we'll move the lieutenant-governor back into the old government house,' " said Ouellette.

Apparently, it's much easier for the government to snap its fingers and make \$550,000 of taxpayers' money disappear.

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