

## Stelmach's arts vision faces funding crunch

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Calgary Herald

*Tuesday, January 29, 2008*

Premier Ed Stelmach, amidst much fanfare last Friday, unveiled the province's long-awaited Arts and Culture Policy.

In a room filled with a who's who of the arts world, simulcast in Calgary and Edmonton, the premier talked about how important arts and culture is to the future of the province and that it is part of his government's plan to address quality of life challenges.

It was time to follow in the footsteps of former premier Peter Lougheed, he intoned, with Lougheed and his wife Jeanne looking on.

During the time Lougheed led the province, longtime residents might recall, a separate Ministry of Culture was put in place; and the 14 years of his stewardship are widely considered the golden era for arts and culture in the province.

If last week's announcement is any indication, Stelmach still has a long way to go before he actually follows in Lougheed's steps, at least in this regard.

The new policy -- shepherded across the finish line by former Alberta Ballet director, Michelle Stanners -- was full of encouraging words about arts and culture, but the \$12 million doesn't even come close to meeting the vision.

Heck, the actual portion going to arts and culture -- the amount going to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts -- is \$9 million; that wouldn't even cover the annual operating budget of the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra.

Even better, because this comes under the minister responsible for Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture, some of that money can be made available for recreational facilities.

What needs to be pointed out is that anything to do with recreation gets the lion's share of monies that flow from the Alberta Lotteries in the form of Community Facility Enhancement or Community Initiative Programs. In other



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Premier Ed Stelmach's new policy was full of encouraging words, but lacked enough money.

words, there's plenty for recreation beyond what the premier announced Friday; sadly, the equivalent does not exist for the arts.

In a world of \$90 oil, that \$12 million works out to about eight hours of oil royalties, or five and a half hours of oil and natural gas royalties combined.

Cast in that light, it really is a pittance.

Especially if horse racing gets nearly a quarter of that amount every year.

But it goes beyond that.

Calgary's corporate community is competing for talent around the world in what is a very tight labour market.

And many of these qualified people live in cities that are much more cosmopolitan than Calgary. Moreover, many of the younger types in the labour market have travelled the globe before they land their first job; and the annual Stampede just isn't going to be enough to keep them interested in Calgary.

Think about this too: Calgary's boomers are increasingly sending their offspring to some very interesting parts of the globe for their post-secondary schooling. If there is a hope of having them come back here and become part of the economic landscape, it's with a vibrant and interesting arts scene.

"There are some of us who are interested in art that has survived the test of time of a few hundred years," said one corporate exec, "the Stampede just isn't enough."

To think that having the lowest personal tax rate and no sales tax is all that is needed is naive and short-sighted.

Stelmach could learn a few things from companies such as Enbridge, Nexen, Petro-Canada and Talisman, each of which are generous supporters of arts organizations.

"We have a wholistic approach to community giving," says D'Arcy Levesque, vice-president of Public and Government Affairs for pipeline giant Enbridge.

"We believe if you want to create dynamic communities you need to support health care, education, social services and arts and culture," he said.

Levesque, who was chair of the board of the Alberta College of Art and Design when it hired its current president, Lance Carlson, says funding arts and culture is a great investment because it allows Enbridge to reach a wide range of people in the community who tend to share the same concerns about other aspects of society.

He also says it's paying dividends in terms of the competitiveness in the hiring process because the new grads are concerned about a company's corporate social responsibility.

Last spring, a poll commissioned by the Herald showed that Calgarians believe the government should be doing more to support arts and culture in the province.

It appears the government isn't listening; that \$12 million works out to about \$3.50 per person -- less than half the price of a movie ticket.

The reaction from the arts community last Friday was predictably guarded; many said they were pleased because under former premier Ralph Klein there was, for all intents and purposes, nothing in the pot for arts groups.

But let's stop with this relativism.

The fact remains there has been a fundamental lack of understanding and appreciation for the importance of the arts at the government level ever since Lougheed left office in 1985.

The total budget for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts now sits at \$35 million, but for the longest time it was mired at \$16 million. On a per capita basis, funding for the arts in Alberta has been on a steady decline for the better part of two decades, even with last week's announcement. Statistics Canada numbers show that Alberta ranks third last in terms of per capita arts funding in Canada.

There's a lot of catching up to do.

And lest the premier believes the corporate sector is to pick up the tab, he should think again. Corporate Calgary has been bridging the funding gaps in the areas of health care and education since 1993; what's left has gone to social services and arts and culture, and they are tired of being asked.

Friday's announcement was window-dressing. And it's time everyone stopped saying that it's better than what existed before.

No matter where one looks -- health care, education, social services, the arts, sustainable development -- the Alberta government abdicated its responsibility long ago and the electorate has let them get away with it.

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