

Tory pledges to cost \$812M

Ten days of promises worth \$940 per second

Tony Seskus, with files from Jason Fekete, Calgary Herald

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As the clock counted down on an expected election call, Premier Ed Stelmach rolled out more spending plans Wednesday, ringing up a 10-day total estimated at \$812 million -- approaching \$1,000 a second.

The premier pointed to the pledges, including six new schools for Calgary, as proof of his Conservative government's commitment to meeting the growing needs of Albertans.

Critics quickly labelled it "bad politics and bad policy."

The spending, which equates to \$940 a second over the 10 days, even drew comparisons to Paul Martin's failed bid to win the federal Liberals support ahead of the 2005-06 campaign.

"This is straight out of the federal Liberal playbook," said Scott Hennig of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, which tracked the spending.

"We haven't seen this in Alberta, really, in this form . . . this type of right-before-an-election spending."

But the premier shot back at opponents who questioned whether the government's numerous spending announcements are fiscally responsible.

"On the operational side, we will never, ever spend more money than what we earn," Stelmach told reporters in Calgary.

"On the capital, we've set money aside in the capital plan, in the capital budget and in the capital account. It's separate from the operation and we're only spending the money that we have in the account."

On Wednesday alone the Stelmach government pledged:

- \$22.5 million to support a provincial stroke strategy;



CREDIT: Canwest News Service photo
 Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach and Associate Minister for Capital Planning Gene Zwozdesky talk about plan

- \$198,000 to Edmonton Meals on Wheels;
- \$6.5 million for an expansion at Grande Prairie Regional College;
- \$190 million for 20 school infrastructure projects, including upgrading and modernization.

Stelmach, who addressed the Calgary Chamber of Commerce on Wednesday, said Alberta's program spending reflects the increase in population, plus inflation. "And when they (people) come here, they require services in health and education -- and we're working as hard as we can to catch up with the demands," the premier said.

The Tory government also committed to building 14 new schools in both the Calgary and Edmonton regions -- a move widely welcomed by parents awaiting schools in new communities -- but didn't put a price tag on the projects because they will be built using public-private partnerships.

The news came on a whirlwind day of politics that felt like a provincial election had already ignited, as new Tory billboards went up in Calgary.

Alberta Liberal Leader Kevin Taft promised that as premier, he would promote energy conservation by offering homeowners financial incentives for high-efficiency furnaces and other energy-saving home retrofits. The party would pay for this by overhauling the province's natural gas rebate program.

Taft will launch the Liberals' election official campaign today by unveiling his party's platform in a speech at the University of Alberta.

In Edmonton, NDP Leader Brian Mason on Wednesday took aim at the Stelmach government's newly released infrastructure strategy. He said the \$6 billion per year outlined in the plan is actually a budget cut from the \$6.9 billion per year outlined in the Conservatives' 2007-10 capital plan. "The Tories are playing fast and loose with the facts to try and make their \$56 billion infrastructure debt go away before they call the election," he said in a statement.

Wildrose Alliance Leader Paul Hinman focused his criticism on the spending plans that Stelmach has announced in recent days. He said the government should have to present a budget before making such promises, but it is certain the premier will call an election before the budget is released on Feb. 14.

"They have the cheque book and they can write the cheques -- but they're using it to buy the votes," said Hinman, who is attending a number of town hall events in southern Alberta in the coming days.

The Fraser Institute, a right-wing public policy think-tank, also scolded the province for how it spends. It issued a report Wednesday that said Alberta and Nova Scotia led the country in average annual increases in program spending over the past five years -- 9.9 per cent.

Niels Veldhuis, director of fiscal studies at the Fraser Institute, said Alberta used to be the "beacon in terms of fiscal standards, constrained spending, tax relief, positive investment climate."

"And because of the spending they've undertaken in the last little while,

they're putting all at that at risk."

tseskus@theherald.canwest.com

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