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QUIET TIME



Heather Park Middle School students dropped everything for 30 minutes on Friday at lunchtime to read en masse for literacy week. JOHN MCKENZIE/FREE PRESS

ANALYSIS

A budget that doesn't matter

The allegation of cooked forecasts in the latest NDP budget is a damaging sideshow.

The real news should be that the NDP — again — is spending at a rate the province can't really afford or sustain.

The Liberals stole the headlines by revealing that Finance Minister Paul Ramsey and finance ministry staff pushed BC Hydro to increase its profit forecast for this year. Ramsey needed a bigger dividend from the Crown corporation to balance his budget; he thought the BC Hydro forecasts were too conservative; so he pushed the numbers up.

Cut through all the charges and counter-charges, and those are the facts.

It's not uncommon for managers to be pushed for better returns and higher targets by their masters. But Ramsey has two problems. There's no clear, written justification for his decision, no paper

trail or disclosure. And he's a victim of history. The fudged budget introduced before the 1996 election is fresh in voters' minds. (The Liberals handed out little packages of fudge before the budget speech as a reminder.)

And that means voters will look at the budget and wonder what other stretches it contains, whether other revenues have been pushed up, or expenses minimized.

And they'll look especially closely because the claim of a balanced budget for this year is already tenuous.

Yes, Premier Ujjal Dosanjh claims the budget is balanced. But that's before a \$300-million contingency fund. As soon as

that is tapped into, B.C. slides back into a deficit.

How likely is that? Consider, for a start, that 14 out of 20 government ministries over-spent their budgets this year.



Paul Willcocks

Carrier case back before PG judge

By CHERYL JAHN

Free Press staff writer

Nearly two years after the controversial decision was released, the Carrier Lumber case will be back in the courtroom.

On July 29, 1999, Justice Glen Parrett released a 224-page decision that chastised how the provincial government handled the Carrier Lumber case, and the premature cancellation of the company's timber licence in the Chilcotin Plateau in 1993.

Carrier was granted a 10-year non-renewable licence to harvest five million cubic metres in December 1983. After two native blockades, the licence was



Parrett

Call centres check out city

Competitors of Stream look around PG

By CHRISTIANA WIENS

Free Press staff writer

It's not Stream, but several American call centres are poking around Prince George, looking for a home.

The most interest has come from a Dallas, Texas site locator, acting on behalf of multiple American call-centres, who was in contact with local real estate agents in search of a building Friday.

The company is one of three mostly American site locators that have been in contact with the Prince George Region Development Corporation since Stream International abandoned interest in The Brick building downtown.

Stream has since expressed interest in Chilliwack, but no deal has been struck in that city either.

"There's nothing new on that front," says Mayor Colin Kinsley. "Quite frankly I think that's a part of what's happening with the whole IT industry."

He characterizes the interest as "intermediate discussions" where agents have shared information, but no site visits have actually taken place as yet.

Margret Horvath, economic development manager with the Development Corporation, says at least a couple of the new bidders are direct competitors of Stream, handling calls for technology-based companies in the U.S. One of the site locators is based in eastern Canada.

"Some are in the customer service industry and some are in other industries — which is a good thing," she says. "Most of the activity has been from the ones not in the technology industry."

Ms. Horvath adds most agents end up looking at very much the same locations that Stream did, depending on the size and number of employees needed. "The larger the number of people, you end up looking at the same buildings over and over."

While there's no directive from the city to lead people downtown, 90 per cent of the suitable sites have been the same downtown buildings. "It's kind of a natural progression," she says.

The city has made contact with most of the companies through Links B.C., which markets different locations in the province to interested call centres.

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