

# Budget passes with some opposition

Northern News Services

MLAs overcame a weeks-long impasse Monday when they finally passed the territorial budget.

But even an additional \$5.5 million in top-ups announced Friday weren't enough to sway everyone in its favour.

Two members – Frame Lake MLA Kevin O'Reilly and Nahendeh MLA Shane Thompson – voted against the budget.

The 16 remaining members voted in favour.

"Even with these changes, there are significant cuts in terms of the environment, our education system and economic diversification," O'Reilly said in a statement before the official budget vote. "The overall direction from cabinet's fiscal reduction strategy of cutting jobs, programs and services to fund infrastructure continues unabated."

Trying to make a deal with cabinet on the budget "was far worse than pulling wisdom teeth," O'Reilly said, adding he hopes not to repeat that next year.

While Thompson said the budget has improved, he considered it a failure overall. He cited concerns about job cuts in small communities and issues at Aurora College, among other things.

"It was so focused on cuts to spending without thinking enough about the impacts,"

Thompson said. "This approach does not serve my region well, and I do not think it serves the Northwest Territories well either."

The budget announced Feb. 1 proposed approximately \$1.7 billion in operational spending in 2017-18.

On Friday afternoon, Finance Minister Robert C. McLeod offered to inject another \$4.8 million into the budget for home care, an

anti-poverty fund, youth in crisis, freight costs for the fishing industry, the Mineral Incentive Program and the Community Access Program.

He also promised to defer reductions to Aurora College's teacher education and social work programs, which amounts to another \$669,000 in changes.

Aurora College is set to undergo a foundational review, although intake of new students into the two programs is on hold until that can be completed, McLeod said.

MLAs had been pushing the government to meet their requests for additional spending since the budget was announced last month.

Those budget talks led to tension in the legislative assembly, where regular MLAs threatened to vote it down and slowed a final vote by deferring the majority of departmental budgets.

## LEGISLATIVE Assembly briefs

with Kirsten Fenn

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The Standing Committee on Priorities and Planning successfully negotiated for \$15.4 million in budget improvements ahead of its release in February, which led to the inclusion of 911, more junior kindergarten funding and the reversal of several program cuts, according to a news release from the legislative assembly.

## Aurora College under the microscope

The government wants to take a hard look at how well Aurora College meets the needs of students and the labour force.

Education, Culture and Employment Minister Alfred Moses announced Monday a third party will complete a foundational review of the college by this fall.

The review will look at the functionality of the college as a whole, including administration and programming.

"The foundational review will help inform the government's long-term vision for Aurora College and position it to provide the necessary skills and knowledge our residents require to participate in and contribute to the social and economic fabric of the NWT for decades to come," Moses said.

The minister said the review will be implemented by the 2018-19 academic year.

Aurora College is also in the process of completing a strategic plan, which Moses said would help inform the foundational review. Moses said the strategic plan will look at the college's "vision" for providing programs and services to the NWT.

"Members of the legislative assembly will be provided with multiple opportunities to contribute to the foundational review, including providing feedback on the terms of reference," he said.

The announcement comes after Aurora College announced it was terminating admis-

sions to its social work and teacher education programs starting next school year as a result of funding cuts.

While the government has agreed to hold off on funding reductions to the two programs while the review is undertaken, the education minister has shied away from promising the programs will continue in the future.

## Class-time reduction questioned again

The education minister skirted away from answering whether a three-year pilot program to reduce class time across the NWT would be reversed if it proves unsuccessful.

Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green posed the question to Education, Culture and Employment Minister Alfred Moses on Monday after saying she doesn't believe the program is truly a pilot project, "but an across-the-board change."

"Usually a pilot project is a trial," Green said. "Strengths and weaknesses are identified and then the pilot program is rolled out everywhere. That is not what is happening here."

Moses did not say whether the changes in instructional hours could be reversed or not after the three-year test period ends.

He did however say the education department plans to use things like graduation and attendance rates to measure the program's success annually.

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment did not yet have a clear assessment tool for assessing the project when it briefed the Standing Committee on Social Development on it last month.

Moses tried to assure Green on Monday that "not all schools have jumped on to taking this pilot on" and that it is optional.

He said he will know exactly how many schools are taking part in the project by the end of March, when school calendars are due.



Robin Grant/NNSI photo

## DANCING THE NIGHT AWAY

Lynn Taylor and her dance partner Matthew Grogono dance during the Yk Social Dance at the Ptarmigan rehearsal space on Feb. 25. In the back dance Lesley Singer, left, and Garry Singer.

## International Women's Day

March 8

Women can take their place in public life.

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Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

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