

BC Election 2017 Special Edition

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Another election?

Seniors have a lot of experience with elections. Seniors turn out to vote in large numbers! Politicians know that! So particularly during election campaigns, they make a show of listening to us. They promise much.

It has been that way for a long time. To sort out which promises are credible, we can start by reviewing our experience with politicians in the last 10 years or so.

Did we get what we wanted and needed?

Our Members of the Legislature [and their staff] generally work very hard – regardless of their political affiliation. Are they conducting the public business in our interest ...?

The social support systems we built earlier in our lifetime are severely threatened. They have been 'nibbled away' at, downsized, downloaded, and underfunded. It feels like neglect! Our public services generally suffer from inadequate funding and insufficient qualified staffing. More and more, necessary public services are contracted to private for-profit companies. Alternatively, they are delivered by charities mostly staffed by

volunteers. Another troubling trend is the replacement of human interactions by computerization and voice mail hell!

This is not a surprise:

Politicians know that seniors are concerned about Income/ Poverty, Healthcare, Housing and Transportation. That has not changed, nor have the actions, or rather, general inactions by governments ... Over 300 seniors from all corners of British Columbia attended the September 2016 COSCO conference, *'Aging Well; A quest For All Generations'*. From the conference, a **Call for Action**

emerged. [For the entire report, see www.coscobc.org]

We have studied the issues more than enough.

Time for Action Now

It is time that seniors, close to one fifth of BC's population, are taken seriously. We have to tell candidates and politicians what is required of them to get our vote!

COSCO is a non-partisan organization. We urge you to vote and to vote for candidates and/or parties who understand and ACT in your interest.

We are all in this together!



BC Budget 2017

a preamble to BC Election 2017

The province released its budget February 21. What does it mean for seniors?

Seniors were not specifically mentioned in the budget even though we are a large portion of the BC population. There is but one possible benefit in this budget: Medical Services Plan premiums – the government decided to cut the premiums in half starting January 2018. This means that we will be paying close to the rate we paid in 2001. Two Thousand and One was the year in which the continuous increase to premium rates began. BC is the only province that charges everyone a flat rate, rather than rolling it into our tax system. This reduction of premium payment is the largest tax cut in the budget; the rest are cuts to business taxes.

The government is putting more funds into child protection, something that is long overdue. It will go some way of rectifying the 15 years of underfunding.

The budget promises an increase to infrastructure spending—for public transit, it amounts to only 10% of that spending. One large amount is allocated to bridges, such as the Massey tunnel replacement. The other large amount is destined to BC Hydro projects, like the questionable Site C dam.

The government will put more money into building schools and universities but not for operating costs. So do not expect tuition fees to drop. However, there will be a lower interest rate for student loans.

In response to the Supreme Court judgment about class sizes and class composition, there will be significant increase for public schools. There is a small amount of money allocated to school supplies for one year.

Health care continues to be underfunded – with less than 8% of the ‘Gross Domestic Product’. In residential care facilities the underfunding is appalling because almost all facilities failed to meet the government already low staffing guidelines*. While health spending increased by 1.5%, it does not restore amounts lost since 2001.

Housing initiatives that might make housing more affordable for our low-income population are not included.

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Climate change mitigation does not exist in this budget.

There is new funding for 2000 new childcare spaces. This is helpful but not nearly sufficient to cover the existing and anticipated need. Funding for a provincial childcare program appears to be absent. Childcare is a financially crippling expense for parents. Many seniors provide daycare for their own grandchildren, because of the lack of spaces in good licensed daycare.

The disability allowance was increased by \$50 a month, while welfare subsistence rates have not increased since 1987.

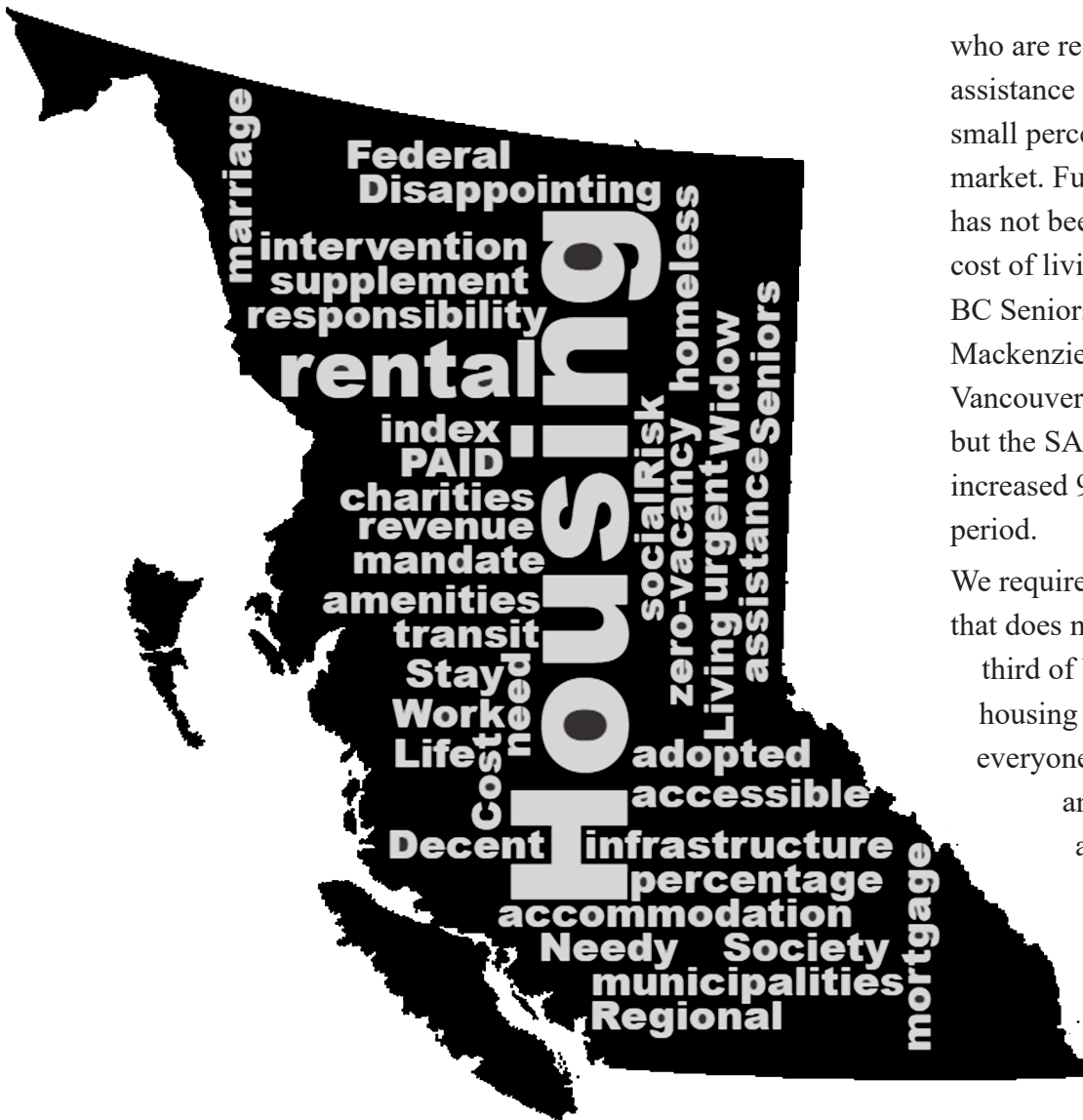
Seniors are not impressed by this budget...

- ★ New money for seniors’ home care \$500 million, because of the Health Accord deal recently signed between the Province and the Federal Government payable over 4 years. It was not part of the 2017 provincial budget.

[Excerpted and adapted from
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives publication]



Housing for BC Seniors NOW



who are receiving such rental assistance represent only a very small percentage of the rental market. Furthermore, the subsidy has not been indexed with the cost of living. According to BC Seniors Advocate Isobel Mackenzie, rents in Metro Vancouver have increased 34% but the SAFER subsidy has only increased 9% over the same time period.

We require affordable housing that does not cost more than one third of before-tax income, housing that is accessible for everyone – handy to transit and other community amenities. Research shows us that the cost of providing decent housing is similar to existing public costs, taking health care and

Nowhere else in Canada is there a more urgent need for help than the situation among renters. There is a need to increase rental subsidies, especially Shelter Aid for the Elderly Renter (SAFER). Statistics from the Fraser Health regional report that over half of the renters who are seniors had income of \$30,000 or less. The BC government's preferred

intervention in housing is through subsidies. *"Subsidies are preferable"* says Rich Coleman, BC Minister of Housing, *"Because they are quicker and more efficient than having to build at all."* These subsidies are a way of supplementing low income seniors so that they can stay in accommodation that would otherwise be unaffordable. However, the numbers for those

social services into account. ALL levels of government combined must work together to meet their responsibility to provide housing!

- Build more senior appropriate, accessible and affordable housing units now
- Develop long-term strategy and programs for housing with firm targets and deadlines.
- Pass enforceable rent-control regulations

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HOUSING

BY THE NUMBERS

- According to Statistics Canada, by 2036 one quarter of the Canadian population will be 65 years and older.
- 70% of Canadians own their homes however this number in Vancouver is 49%, and 51% of Vancouverites rent.
- The number of older adults 50+ and seniors who have become homeless in increasing numbers now make up almost one quarter of people in our shelters [Homeless Hub newsletter 2016].
- In BC, 46% of renters spend more than one third of their total household income on housing.
- The BC Seniors Advocate reports there are 850,000 seniors in BC. One fifth of seniors rent; most often they have fixed incomes; prices of utilities are increasing.
- Isobel Mackenzie, the BC Seniors

Advocate reports that the median income of BC Seniors is just \$26,000 for those over 65 year old, and just \$22,000 for those over 75 years but Vancouver average market apartment monthly rental is \$1,233. Elsewhere in the province, the picture is also grim.

- Metro Vancouver affordability rate is third worst in the English-speaking world, especially affecting young families and seniors with limited income. [According to Demographia]
- In Metro-Vancouver almost a quarter of the land base is set aside for agricultural use. However many of these plots are occupied by luxury mansions whose owners benefit from tax breaks meant for farmers.
- City of Vancouver reports that 8,000

families live in one bedroom or studio apartments in the city.

- We need support for more family-friendly housing and age-friendly accommodations. 94% of Canadians want ground-oriented low-rise housing.

Cooperation among levels of government to increase rental housing supply is vital. Limited supply drives up prices as population continues to increase. It is impossible for municipal governments to solve the “housing crisis”. - There is no “magic” fix for the lack of affordable housing in BC. A long-term strategy and programs with firm targets and time lines must be developed by all levels of government representatives working together.



HOME CARE/HOME SUPPORT FOR SENIORS

- Quality home support services can help to keep vulnerable seniors and disabled persons comfortable and safe and out of expensive hospital beds. Quality home support can also help family caregivers, often seniors themselves, to avoid burnout and to remain healthy.
- Several studies show that home support services in B.C. have been severely underfunded for several years.
- A three-year investigation by the B.C. Ombudsperson on seniors care in B.C. released in 2012 found that “the Ministry of Health did not make sure that seniors and their families had adequate assistance and support to navigate the complex home and

community care system” and made 176 recommendations for improvements.

- The title of an independent 2015 study, “Living up to the Promise: Addressing the High Cost of Underfunding and Fragmentation in B.C.’s Home Support System” by the Integrated Care Advocacy Group and the B.C. Health Coalition speaks for itself.
- A 2016 report of the Office of the Seniors Advocate, an office of the BC government, on home support found “clear messages [from seniors] about where there are opportunities about room for improvement.”
- On February 26th, the federal gov-

MEDICAL SERVICE PLAN PREMIUM/TAX

- Change to the premiums citizens will have to pay will happen in January 2018 ... and then they will only have been cut by half
- BC is the only province where citizens must pay an MSP premium in order to access health care
- COSCO and many other organizations in B.C. have long argued that the MSP premium is not a health insurance premium but an unfair regressive tax that favours the wealthy and that needs to be scrapped.
- The MSP premium is not a health insurance premium but a tax; and a regressive tax that Premier Clark has called unfair.
- Eliminate the MSP now by adjusting government spending priorities

ernment and the B.C. government signed a new 10 year, \$1.4 billion health care funding agreement that includes \$785 million for better home care and more than \$650 million for better mental health initiatives. The federal government has said that it will include strong accountability measures for these separate funds.

- Work to develop public long-term care and assisted living facilities to reduce reliance on the for-profit sector
- Increase home support hours to include housekeeping services
- Bring the home care services under a cohesive umbrella to eliminate the proliferation of for-profit agencies

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TRANSPORTATION

We live longer, healthier lives. Accessible transportation services are essential to help seniors stay active and engaged in our communities.

What is required?

- The B.C. Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure must adopt and legislate implementation of “Vision Zero”, a road traffic safety program that aims to eliminate fatalities and/or serious injuries in road traffic. [In 2016, seven out of eleven pedestrian deaths in Vancouver were seniors!]
- We need provincial leadership that encourages and supports public, transit-supportive community planning and land development in all regions and municipalities in BC
- All levels of government need to fund, develop and maintain improved public transportation. In planning routes and service, seniors must be consulted.
- Bus shelters, as well as drinking fountains and public toilets have to be part of transportation infrastructure. That must become universal, not optional.
- Essential services like HandiDART must be increased and become more responsive to the needs of seniors and the disabled especially in areas outside of the Lower Mainland.
- Signage on the roads must be reflective, large print and easily read at a distance.
- Driving assessment of seniors must be done in a sensitive, respectful way. The Motor Vehicle Branch must seriously consider appropriate, gradual driving restrictions particularly for seniors who live outside of large communities where public transit may not be available.



ECONOMIC AND INCOME SECURITY



Many seniors in BC are doing okay financially. But at least one sixth of our seniors are poor. Their income is below the poverty level. Alarming, most of them are single women and the number is increasing. Half of all seniors have an after-tax income of less than \$25,000. Income is a crucial element of the “social determinants of health”.

The high cost of housing and hydro, lack of essential health plans/services, rising cost of nutritious food and transportation all complicate the later life of older adults. They add significant stress which contributes to poor health.

Government must eliminate poverty by adopting a poverty reduction plan and strategy with legislated targets and timelines.

- Begin by assisting our most vulnerable populations immediately.
- Increase publicly funded comprehensive and qualified homecare services personnel ensuring that seniors may live out their days at home in their communities.
- Include seniors in planning for the phasing in of improved 24/7 homecare.
- Develop low-income assistance rates for essential utilities
- Encourage and fund initiatives for developing age-friendly communities
- Build geared-to-income housing to overcome homelessness
- Support quality public services which respect the cultural diversity and diverse needs of seniors

In Conclusion

Seniors are literally running out of time ... and more importantly, we are running out of patience. We require action. We do not want empty promises. The candidates worthy of our votes must tell us specifically how they plan to implement the public supports and services we need.

So when you attend all-candidates' meetings or the candidate comes to your door step, ask what they are prepared to do. How will he/she provide the necessary housing, income security, and home care. Cast your ballot for the candidate who provides real solutions. Remember, what is good for us is also good for the next generation.

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About COSCO

COSCO is a democratic, non-partisan umbrella organization with 87 affiliated organizations representing 80,000 seniors. COSCO is recognized as a leader for social change affecting seniors.

Our motto is

"Seniors helping seniors".

For more information, please visit www.coscobic.org
COSCO is also affiliated with the 1,000,000 member National Pensioners Federation (NPF) which promotes these issues at the national level.

A major focus of COSCO's work is promoting good health. To this end, COSCO Seniors' Health and Wellness Institute's volunteers provide a series of free workshops on 43 topics ranging from Falls Prevention to Health Literacy. More than 30,000 people have attended these workshops.

COSCO News welcomes your letters and contributions:

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with copy to
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Roz Bailey, Linda Forsythe, Leslie Gaudette, Kathleen Jamieson
and Barb Mikulec contributed content for this newsletter.

Thank you!

COSCO Associate Membership

☐ In addition to my \$25 Associate Membership fee, I wish to make a donation of \$_____ to COSCO.

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COSCO does not share mailing lists with third parties, unless we are required by law to do so.

Associate Membership is \$25 a year. Please make cheques payable to COSCO and mail your application to:

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