



# COSCO News

Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of B.C.

Number 78

[www.coscobc.ca](http://www.coscobc.ca)



April 2010

## Together, we can build a better B.C. – and with your help, we can stop the HST

By Sylvia MacLeay,  
President, COSCO

The Coalition to Build a Better B.C. was formed in a series of meetings sponsored by the B.C. Federation of Labour early in 2010 as a community response to numerous cuts to education, the arts, funding for non-profit and charitable organizations and cost increases to seniors in health care facilities as well as the announcement of a 12% Harmonized Sales Tax (HST).

If B.C. is “the greatest place on earth,” why are people (especially the most vulnerable) being treated so badly? Meanwhile large corporations are granted tax breaks.

The Coalition includes a wide spectrum of the community all of whom are being harmed, each in their own way. Actions taken to date include a Dialogue on Building a Better B.C. held at the Vancouver Library on March 14 with representatives of the different sectors of the community becoming better acquainted, sharing ideas, and planning to work together to achieve a civil society where everyone is treated fairly. You'll find a special four page report on this event in the centre of this edition of COSCO News.

The second large event is a Rally to be held on Saturday April 10 at the Art Gallery on Georgia St. in

Vancouver from 12:00 noon to 1:00 pm. The rally may be over by the time you receive this COSCO News. However, banners and posters will show the large variety of endorsers of the Coalition. Speakers will address the crowd and print materials will be shared showing that the entire community is serious about the cuts and increased costs for goods and services that many cannot afford. Seniors will wear signs that say *Down with the HST*.

Seniors will also participate in the action organized by Bill Vander Zalm using the Recall and Initiative Act to force a vote on whether or not the citizens of B.C. want the HST. Elections B.C. must receive petitions from 10% of the registered voters in every riding for the initiative to go ahead. The canvasser rules and petitions must be correctly completed or they will not be accepted. There will be 90 days to collect the signatures, from April 5- July 6. Since the HST tax will be implemented on July 1, 2010, there will be refunds

should the initiative succeed.

The Vander Zalm Campaign has done a Northern Tour which was wildly successful. Colin Hansen followed at each town the next day to give his spin and Liberal MLAs were also active. More tours will follow.

Seniors fully realize that taxes are essential for funding benefits and services that are needed in every civil society. Health care, affordable housing, transportation, adequate pensions, safe neighbourhoods, safe infrastructure, and a green environment are a few of our needs.

The HST is a regressive tax that hurts the poor. Seniors are prepared to pay their taxes when those who have more income pay their fair share. BC needs major tax reform to make BC the “greatest place on earth.”

Information about what the HST will cost seniors, and what you can do to support the initiative to stop it is on page 4.

*If undeliverable, please return to 14372 Ridge Cres., Surrey, V3X 1B6*

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[www.coscobc.ca](http://www.coscobc.ca)

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*COSCO News welcomes your letters, contributions and suggestions. Please send your letters and comments to [soren.bech@shaw.ca](mailto:soren.bech@shaw.ca), or to COSCO News editor, 23088 - 16 Ave., Langley, B.C. V2Z 1K7.*

## **Way to go Sally!**

Sally Caisley, one of the facilitators for COSCO's Illness and Accident Prevention workshops, has been honoured in Grand Forks for her community activism and her work with our project.

She has been given an Outstanding Women of the Boundary Award as an Inspiring Senior. Sally has raised funds for an Arts Centre at Christina Lake where she resides. She was trained as a workshop facilitator in January and already she has conducted several workshops which were so successful that she has been invited back by several groups to present some of COSCO's new topics. Congratulations Sally!

## **Book a health promotion workshop for your group today**

COSCO sponsors health promotion through a series of illness and accident prevention workshops. Each workshop runs about 90 minutes and is delivered free of charge:

- Falls prevention
- Healthy eating
- Safety in the home
- Safe use of medications
- Frauds and scams
- Understanding osteoarthritis
- Osteoporosis: the silent thief
- Legal documents you need
- Care giving
- Mental health
- The age-friendly community
- Social connectedness
- Emergency preparedness
- Pension and tax allowances
- Dealing with stress
- Addictions and seniors
- Advocacy for seniors
- Preventing elder abuse
- Four chronic diseases

To book a workshop, contact Sheila Pither at [pither470@shaw.ca](mailto:pither470@shaw.ca) or 604 684-9720.

# BUDGET ILLUSIONS

By Keith Baldrey

**F**inance Minister Colin Hansen was missing a few props when he gave his budget presentation last week. It would have been appropriate to have on hand a deck of cards, a black hat and a magic wand. After all, the minister deftly performed some magic tricks and sleight-of-hand games.

Observe his never-before-seen *Take the ICBC Cash and Hide It* trick that wasn't even noticed by his audience until he left the room. Truly amazing!

This bit of trickery will see his government suck almost \$800 million out of ICBC's cash reserves over the next three years (this money is on top of the \$750 million the government will receive from ICBC's earnings).

But this giant windfall isn't actually specifically noted in any place in Hansen's budget. An oblique reference occurs on page 22 of the budget book, but no dollar figure is mentioned. The money is included in a single line item – "contributions from self-supported Crown corporations" – in the so-called "blue book" of spending estimates.

This huge financial transaction is only spelled out in the fine print of ICBC's service plan (kudos to COPE 378, the union at ICBC, for being the first to figure out the finance minister's magical powers on this front).

Another crowd-dazzling feat of sleight-of-hand came with Hansen's *Almost Giving Back What We Took Earlier* trick with arts funding. In fact, this gets its own little display box on page 64 of the budget.

This nice presentation (entitled A

Renewed Emphasis on the Arts and Sports: New Opportunities for Participation) tries to leave the impression that the B.C. Liberal government is committing huge financial resources to the arts sector.

To make this argument, the budget actually refers to money spent on arts three whole years ago. This bit of wizardry – only the minister could use money spent years ago to dress up his budget today – also sees the government include the operating grant for the Royal B.C. Museum as part of arts and culture spending for the first time, in order to make the total seem quite larger than it really is.

As well, no mention exists anywhere that the charitable gaming grants – which fund everything from Little League baseball to arts groups to parent advisory councils at schools – are still reduced tens of millions of dollars from 2008 levels.

The finance minister, in trying to make an apples-to-apples comparison, replaced a lot of those apples with oranges – without telling anyone. The smoke-and-mirrors aspect of this argument was quite impressive.

Finally, we come to the greatest magic feat of them all. With his hidden powers, Hansen suddenly turned the dreaded Harmonized Sales Tax (HST) into – wait for it – a tax purely dedicated to funding health care.

Hansen tried to impress his audience with this stunning attempt at illusion. He was turning a giant negative into a much-needed positive, right before our very eyes.

Unfortunately for our own Mer-

lin, this trick fell completely flat in the room. The audience – made up of reporters and special interest groups including business, labour and environment sectors – roared with laughter as he tried to explain his reasoning.

This bit of foolery smacked of desperation. The HST is a serious drag on the government's standing with voters, and pretending that it is responsible for funding health care (and nothing else) indicates the B.C. Liberals know how vulnerable they are on this issue.

And one has to wonder how much credibility Hansen has right now when it comes to making any kind of economic argument. The polls indicate voters are smarting over his last budget, which turned out to be wildly off-mark in its projections.

It seems the longer a government is in power, the more tricks it invents to fool the people who keep electing it. We are witnessing this right now with the current administration, which finds itself mired in dire financial straits and a low standing in the polls.

However, there comes a point where it's no longer easy to fool the voters. We may be at that point now, and it may not matter how many ruses the finance minister and his colleagues come up with.

The government needs an economic miracle -- with a corresponding rise in revenues -- just to begin winning back voters. Putting on an amateur magical show at budget time isn't going to cut it this time.

*Keith Baldrey is chief political reporter for Global BC. Re-printed with permission.*

# Do you want to have a vote on the HST?

By Pat Brady

You can vote on the Harmonized Sales Tax (HST). The provincial HST Committee needs additional canvassers in order to obtain the signatures of 10% of the registered voters in each BC provincial riding.

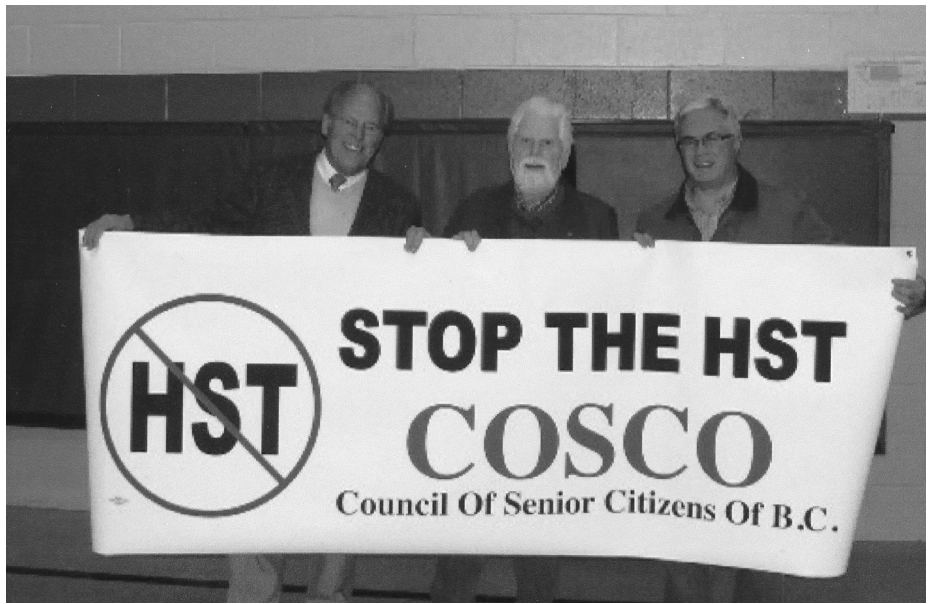
When that 10% has been “signed up” we will have a province-wide vote via a referendum.

To become a canvasser:

1. Go to the [fightHST.com](http://fightHST.com) web site.
2. Click on the “Application for Canvasser Registration.”
3. Print the form.
4. Complete the information required in the upper portion, ensuring that you sign the document and the date of your signature.
5. Do not fill in the “Signature of Proponent” and “Date”. These two boxes will be completed by the proponent.
6. Fax the completed document to (604) 946-1981. Do *not* fax it to The Chief Electoral Officer. The provincial committee will do that later.

You will be contacted by a representative of the provincial committee at a later date with further information and instructions.

This can be a successful endeavour with your help. “Many hands make less work.”



Al Peterson of COSCO, centre, joined former Premier Bill Vander Zalm and provincial Conservative Leader Chris Delaney during an anti-HST tour that swung through northern B.C.

## HST will cost seniors over \$800, member survey finds

By Sheila Pither,  
COSCO Treasurer

What could you do with \$835 a year? Why do I ask? Because that is the average amount people who answered the B.C. Retired Teachers' Association (BCRTA) and COSCO survey said the Harmonized Sales Tax would cost them over the course of a year.

More than 600 people calculated their expenditures in 21 categories which presently escape the provincial sales tax. Then they added 7% to those figures and came up with their total HST hit. \$835.00 on average! Multiply that amount by the number of senior British Columbians and you begin to realize just how much money will be taken from the pockets of retired people.

But everybody will pay this tax—our sons and daughters who are working hard to establish them-

selves in their careers, people who are already struggling to stretch minimum wages to cover the necessities of life. Polls show that more than 80% of our citizens oppose this tax. Will the government listen?

We all realize that taxes are necessary if we are to enjoy the benefits of a civil society. But COSCO's aim is to promote fair taxation, not taxation that burdens people who can least afford it. Please support the drive to get enough signatures to demand a referendum.

*Vote “Yea” or “Nae”, but have your say.*

On this page, you will find information about how you can get involved. A wide spectrum of viewpoints have come together to fight the HST. This is not a push from the political left or right. It's a push from the people.



# FOOD SAFETY

## Daily inspections required for food exports to U.S. – but not for food that's sold in Canada

**By Fred Coates**  
**Provincial President,**  
**B.C. Old Age Pensioners**

**W**hen I first began working in the meat packing industry in 1957 in Brandon, Man., the most vivid impression that I recall was the thorough job done by the Federal inspectors, from the initial slaughter through all processing procedures, up to and including the shipping floor where the finished and properly inspected products left on their way to consumers.

“Fast forward” to 1974. After working in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and B.C. in the meat industry, I joined Agriculture Canada in the Inspection Division. In 1983, I moved to Ottawa to take on the responsibilities of National President of the Agriculture Union, a component of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), representing a membership including 1,700 federal food inspectors.

In 1985, after intensive lobbying by the food processing industry, Agriculture Canada attempted to introduce a reduced inspection procedure called the “Frequency of Inspection Level.”

The purpose was to allow plant employees to take over the federal inspectors’ duties and rather than having one inspector per establishment, he/she would be responsible for five or six plants on a “drop in for an hour” type basis.

After we pointed out the hazards of such a hit or miss program it was very quietly, to some extent, not further pursued by Agriculture Canada.



Fast forward again to the present. Two years ago a major outbreak of listeriosis took the lives of 22 Canadians. After the Minister of Agriculture finally ordered an inquiry into food safety the Weatherill Report did identify a serious shortage in the inspection coverage of processing plants by federal inspectors.

Both Federal Health and Agriculture Ministers agreed last September (2009) that there would be a total of 170 new staff hired. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) would acquire 112 of them with 70 of these positions to be frontline inspectors.

As of March 16, 2010 my sources in Ottawa inform me that none of these “new” resources have been allocated to inspection positions.

Now grit your teeth on this one – on March 17, 2010 it was revealed by the federal inspectors’ representative that as a result of U.S.D.A. complaints regarding U.S. compliance standards, all ready-to-eat processed meats from Canada to the U.S. must have a “daily inspection presence.”

This is now the procedure for product exported to the U.S., but product for domestic (Canadian) consumption is subject only to an inspector’s presence once a week. This alone is an unbelievable disregard for the welfare of Canadians. Do we not merit food safety standards equal to those of our neighbours to the south?

Our food safety is once again at a critical stage. Why have no additional food inspectors been added to the CFIA two years after the listeriosis outbreak that killed 22 Canadians and approximately nine months after the Weatherill Report pointed out inadequate staffing of the federal inspection service?

Giving more responsibility to the food industry to police themselves and their processing procedures is not the proper response to the inspection deficit.

Transport Minister John Baird was quoted on March 16, 2010 saying, “It’s simply wrong for industry to regulate itself”. We should all wonder if Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz would agree with his colleague’s clearly stated position.

# Speaking out on residential care

Hon. Gordon Campbell, Premier  
Victoria, B.C.

Dear Hon. Premier,

We have serious concerns about the government's response to Part One of the Ombudsperson's Report on residential care. The report addresses the growing number of complaints, and increasing public concern about the care received by seniors in residential facilities.

We are dismayed and disappointed that the Minister of Health Services and Minister of Healthy Living and Sports chose to implement only four of the ten recommendations made by the office of the Ombudsperson. The report proposed solutions in three key areas: setting out a clear commitment to care and residents' rights, providing access to useful comparable information about residential facilities, and providing support for resident and family councils.

First, we are pleased that a Residents' Bill of Rights has been set out in legislation and must be posted in each facility. However, more is needed. A clear commitment to monitor, evaluate and report the degree to which the rights are respected would provide residents and families assurance that the government understands, supports and enforces these rights.

Secondly, families have clearly stated they need a single source where comprehensive and comparable information about each residential and assisted living facility is available to them. We would support any model that meets these criteria. We urge the government to act on this need.

Thirdly, resident and family councils can help monitor and evaluate the delivery of care within residential facilities. Government support for family and resident councils must be evident and tangible. That requires legislation. Furthermore, a liaison person should be designated in each facility so residents and families have one individual they know will listen and help solve patient care problems.

Seniors, people with disabilities, families and friends of these individuals, expect the government to

accept the Ombudsperson's recommendations in their entirety, implement them within the time lines indicated, and publicly report the outcomes.

Please reply and let us know when each recommendation will be implemented and what other measures the government intends to take with respect to the Ombudsperson's Report and recommendations.

Yours truly,  
Sylvia MacLeay  
President COSCO

## Seniors Deserve Quality Public Health Care!

Join the BC Health Coalition for an afternoon of networking and strategizing on taking action to demand quality and accessible health care for seniors in BC.

**Lunchtime Keynote Presentation by Provincial Ombudsperson Kim Carter** on her office's systemic investigation into seniors' care and summary of its recent report *The Best of Care: Getting it Right for Seniors in British Columbia*.

### BC Health Coalition Seniors' Forum

**Friday May 14  
12:00pm-4:00pm**

Firefighters' Banquet &  
Conference Centre  
6515 Bonsor St.  
Burnaby, BC  
(in the Metrotown Complex)



**Free!**

Lunch included.

Registration required.

For more details and to register please visit:

[www.bchealthcoalition.ca](http://www.bchealthcoalition.ca)

**SPECIAL  
REPORT**

# DIALOGUE

## ON BUILDING A BETTER B.C.



### Government cutting has continued for too long

Canadians' perception of the size of government is completely out of whack with reality." That was the stark message delivered by Will McMartin to about 150 participants in a dialogue on building a better B.C. held March 20 at the Vancouver public library.

McMartin, a veteran political advisor and analyst who has been affiliated with the Conservative, Social Credit and Reform parties, is a contributing editor with TheTyee.ca.

McMartin said the public sector in Canada today is 80 percent of what it was 20 years ago, and the cuts are continuing.

"A conclusion you might reach today is that government cutting has gone on too long," he said.

While groups like the Fraser Institute and the Canadian Taxpayers' Federation push for more cuts, and say spending is too high, they fail to recognize that governments' share of the economy has steadily fallen.

"By international standards, Canada's public sector is one of the smallest," he said.

McMartin pointed out that when you look at trends in government spending, you can't look at dollars alone. You must also take into account inflation, population growth, the size of the economy and changes in accounting policies.

B.C.'s population grew by 700,000

Please see "Under new budget," page 2





More than 150 people – representing dozens of community, arts, environment, student, senior and labour organizations in B.C. – gave up a sunny Saturday to debate and share ideas for building a more caring, inclusive society in British Columbia.

## Under new BC budget, real spending per capita will contract by 1.2 percent annually for years to come

Continued from page 1

people in the 1990s, and by another 448,000 during the B.C. Liberals' time in office.

This means the province has more taxpayers, and more people who require services. Accommodating those changes does not mean the proportion of public spending has increased.

Even though the number of dollars spent on public services has gone up, the amount per person has gone down and continues to go down.

McMartin cited a BMO Capital Markets analysis of the March 2 provincial budget. It found that after inflation, public spending per capita in B.C. will "contract" 1.2 percent annually in the next few years.

When the B.C. Liberals took office in 2002, public expenditures in B.C. were 22.7 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Under Gordon Campbell, it will soon be under 15 percent.

The tendency, McMartin indicated, is for people to assume that "over-spending" is the cause of government deficits. He cited a recent Ekos opinion poll in which 46 percent of respondents favoured cuts in public services and spending.

"The empirical evidence," he said, "is that spending is not out of control."

Canada and B.C. rely on commodity exports. When commodity prices go up or down, that has a large impact on both jobs and revenues.

"That's what's happening today in both Ottawa and Victoria" -- current deficits are due entirely to falling revenues, not over-spending.

McMartin also cited a Harris-Decima poll which demonstrated that Canadians are increasingly ambivalent about government, and losing confidence in the ability of governments to follow through. For example, 61 percent of respondents favoured cutting corporate taxes to stimulate economic growth.

Of course with less revenue, governments can do less, and that is reflected in the wide-ranging cuts seen in B.C. today.

McMartin said that compared to international factors and commodity prices, tax policies have a negligible ability to either stimulate or shackle economic growth.

On the other hand, the corporate tax cuts introduced by the Campbell government are costing British Columbians between \$1.5 billion and \$2 billion a year – and the government is continuing the tax giveaways to corporations and wealthy individuals.

As an example, McMartin said the government has eliminated the minimum tax on banks. Despite billions in profits, the banks apparently can't afford to contribute \$20 million to public services in B.C.

And the HST, of course, represents another \$1.9 billion tax shift from corporations to individuals.





Adam Lynes-Ford is one of the three co-chairs of the Coalition to Build a Better B.C. He opened the dialogue with a call for "a productive session where we share information, learn from one another, and build our vision for a B.C. where everyone can participate and share in a quality of life that is recognized around the world."

# An inspiring day of conversation and action

**M**ORE THAN 150 people came together March 20 to participate in a full-day dialogue on how we can work together to build a better B.C.

The gathering was remarkable for its diversity, its sense of common purpose, and for the high level of energy that the participants brought to the discussions.

The sessions and discussion topics were largely self-directed, under the guidance of facilitator Bliss Browne.

Browne is the founder of *Imagine Chicago*, a non-profit group with a mission to cultivate hope and civic engagement.

Browne's focus is to help harness people's imagination for the public good, to empower people and organizations to participate in creating hopeful futures for their families and communities by encouraging both discourse and action.

Throughout the day she certainly did that.

Early in the day, Browne asked each person to write down one item that gave him or her "grief", as well as his or her "hope" for the future. The griefs included:

- Cuts in funding for arts and culture, education, health care, and services to people with special needs or disabilities.
- Environmental degradation.
- Welfare of seniors.
- Status and welfare of women.
- Poverty and disparity.
- The HST.
- And political priorities, including concern about "thin democracy" and a lack of connection.

Hopes for the future involved collective action to promote:

- Social justice.
- Welfare of children.
- A healthy environment.
- Funding for education, health care, housing and the arts.

- Respect for women.
- Tax reform.
- And greater citizen involvement in the decisions that affect them.

Throughout the day, participants engaged in group discussions and debate on the issues that concern them – issues that were identified by the participants themselves – and what we can do to build a better B.C.

Considering the multi-cultural, multi-generational nature of the coalition, the consensus that emerged is both refreshing and exciting.

Participants repeatedly emphasized the need to work for positive goals. A common theme reported back from the discussions was the desire to work for a just society that values and includes every individual.

By working together, it was felt by many, we can reach out to people who feel excluded and influence the politicians whose decisions can have such a profound effect on individual lives.

**Mark your calendar!**

**Fun!**

**Family-friendly!**

**Rally  
to build a  
better BC**

***Plan now  
to be there!***

**Noon, Sat. April 10,  
Vancouver Art Gallery  
800 block, W. Georgia**

**[www.betterbc.ca](http://www.betterbc.ca)**

# The hope for a better future for people in our province

**W**E'RE ONTO SOMETHING right," said Jim Sinclair, President of the B.C. Federation of Labour, in concluding remarks to the Dialogue on Building a Better B.C. "The hope of this province lies in gatherings like this."

By working together, we can challenge the ideas and beliefs of what our province can and should be, he said.

Meeting the challenge means bringing together organizations that haven't worked together before -- "to be in rooms full of people we don't know. None of us can do it alone."

"It's so important to people who haven't seen a response to (government) cuts that we show the public we're fighting for them. We can do it together. We can't do it alone."

"We need a movement this wide," he said, stretching his arms, "that reaches right across the province."

Sinclair noted that there are people who benefit when services are cut, people who benefit from child poverty, people who benefit from keeping B.C.'s minimum wage at the lowest level in Canada. "It's not that they don't get it."

The challenge, and it's a huge one, is to create a new consensus of what we can build in B.C. "We need to talk about the world we want, the world we believe in, not just stop the cuts. We need to change what exists today and move forward," he said.

"I want to be back in a room a year from now with three times as many people, and three times as many ideas to improve the world."

That vision of a better future must be based on fairness, decency, and a sense of collective responsibility to each other.

Together, we can build communities that provide health care for those who need it, educational opportunities for young people, and don't abuse the planet, he said.





# Can you imagine living in circumstances like these?

By Gail Harmer, Chair  
COSCO Housing Committee

I live in the West End of Vancouver near two giant concrete towers known as 'Sunset Towers,' owned and operated by BC Housing. The tenants for decades were low income single seniors over 55 and a few disabled single adults. Then things began to change! BC Housing no longer calls this 'Seniors' Housing.' All new tenants are from the 'Hard to House' population.

Can you imagine in your old age, being stuck in an apartment for the remainder of your life where you notice a brown sludge dripping from the ceiling in your bathroom? The 'drip' is from the unit above which houses a resident who is unable to handle a problem like this on their own. The hapless senior below is stuck as managers are often unavailable on weekends! The senior had to live with this disgusting situation for several days.

Meanwhile, on another floor lives a gentle, hard working 'binner' newly housed after many years on the street. Daily, he carts in his 'treasures' from the neighbourhood alleyways. Small wonder that the rate of bedbug infestation throughout the two towers is exploding. It is not uncommon for a senior to find himself living out of plastic bags stored in his kitchen or bathtub for weeks on end as fumigators inspect and treat his now almost chronic bedbug infestation! He can no longer visit with his grandchildren for



Long time residents are trapped as BC Housing converts Sunset Towers from seniors public housing to a complex for the "hard to house."

fear of spreading bedbugs. He can no longer attend the drop-in at the seniors network or hang out with friends from his exercise class for fear of spreading the plague.

In the other tower, another senior cowers in fear. His new neighbour is hammering on doors along the hallway and shouting that he is the 'king of the floor.' He is scantily clad and reeking of fumes from something he's recently ingested! The stairwells have been used on a regular basis as toilets. 'Guests' are not uncommonly encountered roaming the hallways at all hours. The 'hard to house' new tenants have traded their hospitality for goods or services 'in kind' from persons you would not like sharing hallways, foyers and elevators with anyone you cared about!

To make matters worse, BC Housing used to support tenant councils but it recently took the intervention of local MLA, Spencer Herbert (NDP), to get BC Housing to allow the concerned Sunset Towers' residents an opportunity to air their grievances with BC Housing. Since that meeting, BC Housing has installed temporary security guards to patrol periodically. The result was a sharp reduction in safety issues.

However, that was only possible as there was some money available before the end of the March 31st fiscal year. Heaven knows what happens April 1st! They also reportedly agreed to reconsider accepting further level 4 'hard to house'. Who knows what that means?

The Sunset Towers' seniors are trapped! Since they are already in public housing, they cannot move to another public housing setting. The current market rental situation is so tight and the rents so high that the rent supplement offered through the provincial SAFER program would still mean the OAS/GIS dependent senior in Vancouver would not be able to afford to pay rent and eat. The long wait lists for a Co-op subsidized unit means you'd be dead before you ever got in and, if not, given the deterioration of most of the co-op housing stock, the likelihood of the building not being condemned by the time your name came up would be slight!

Why should poor BC seniors be condemned to this treatment for the rest of their lives by BC voters who elect governments that make things like this happen to our elders? Can you still call BC a 'civil society'?



# Fighting for the public interest

By Gudrun Langolf

**T**he Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) is a non-profit law office that gives legal advice and may represent individuals and groups that usually don't have money or skills to represent themselves.

A Board of Directors governs PIAC. The work of the Centre is performed by five lawyers (one is the Executive Director, Jim Quail), three administrative assistants and an articulated law student.

PIAC is involved with:

- Regulation of utility services and compulsory car insurance.
- Social justice, which also covers so-called poor law.

In the area of regulation, PIAC intervenes and represents a coalition of community organizations who speak for low-income citizens, the consumers. These may include seniors (like COSCO), tenants, people with disabilities and anti-poverty groups. The regulatory tribunals involved here include the BC Utilities Commission (BCUC), which sets rates and conditions for electricity to name just one example. Occasionally a case may end up in the courts.

The Centre has represented residential ratepayers of the regulated energy (like hydro, gas) and telecommunications utilities since 1982 and the ICBC compulsory insurance policy holders since 2003.

Social justice encompasses a wide variety of legal issues, just listing a few:

- Social entitlements and income support.

- Democratic access (like information & voting rights).
- Rights of low-income and under represented workers, like farm workers.

PIAC staff represent the clients in the courts, before statutory tribunals and offices like the Ombudsman, and the Information and Privacy Commissioner among others. PIAC provides services to individuals and groups on five levels:

- Systemic and test case litigation.
- Law Reform.
- Research.
- Short service matters.
- General advice and referral.

From time to time and as appropriate PIAC works in coalition with

groups in setting up or participating in forums and/or legal challenges.

More and more, BC Hydro, the BC Utilities Commission and BC Transmission Corporation staff request consultations about matters not yet in the official processes.

The Centre is mostly funded by the BC Law Foundation and costs awarded by BCUC. The Law Foundation administers a fund generated by the interest earnings of trust accounts.

A relatively recent intervention in front of the BCUC was the Alcan/Hydro application for increase in power generation and purchase/selling price of the electricity Alcan generates.

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## How air quality can affect your health – and what you can do to minimize the risk

Every individual reacts differently to air pollution. Elders, children and those with heart or lung disease are most sensitive to the adverse health effects of air pollution. People with diabetes are also at greater risk because they are more prone to heart disease.

Even Canadians who are relatively fit and healthy can experience symptoms when exercising or working outdoors if pollution levels are higher than usual. Air pollution has a measurable impact on health. Analysis of data from eight Canadian cities shows that 5,900 deaths can be linked to air pollution every year. Air pollution sends thousands more Canadians to hospital each year.

We can protect our health from the negative health effects of air pollution by appropriately changing our behaviour to reduce our exposure to air pollutants when air quality deteriorates.

Checking the Air Quality Health Index on a regular basis is the first step. The Air Quality Health Index is being introduced in communities across Canada in a phased approach.

Look for it with weather forecasts for your community or go to [www.airhealth.ca](http://www.airhealth.ca).

You can use the forecasts to plan your activities, whether over the next hour or the next day.

## Letters to the Editor

### Government grabs our cash from ICBC

I must comment on the provincial government's hypocrisy over the move to scoop hundreds of millions of dollars from ICBC. Finance Minister Colin Hansen has complained that ICBC's optional car insurance business is "overcapitalized," and that is certainly true. ICBC has stuffed huge amounts of surplus money under the mattress, all collected from the motoring public. However, Hansen has not come clean about how that came about.

On June 30, 2004, the Cabinet issued an order-in-council requiring ICBC to bulk up its capital reserves, to levels that were astronomical for a Crown corporation with a monopoly on compulsory insurance. The order required ICBC to build up its capital base for its optional insurance coverages to 200% of the minimum standard required of private insurers called the "Minimum Capital Test"). The deadline for meeting that target was 2010. And here we are.

This resulted in a hearing before the Utilities Commission that approved insurance premiums that would collect all of that surplus cash. We participated in the hearing on behalf of the public, arguing that ICBC was being grossly overcapitalized, but the Commission's hands were largely tied by Cabinet.

Looking back, it is hard not to conclude that BC motorists have been set up: first Victoria compels ICBC to over-collect its optional insurance premiums, and then it raids the piggy bank to grab our money

that's been obediently piling up.

The fair solution is to come clean, and let ICBC refund the excess cash to customers by cutting premiums.

Jim Quail,  
Executive Director,  
Public Interest Advocacy Centre

### Taxes are not an affliction

The issue of taxes and tax increases is one of the most important matters facing Canada.

Taxes are not an affliction, as Stephen Harper would paint them; they are the price we pay for a civilized society. However, Mr. Harper seems to think the price is too high; he would rather spend public money on tax cuts for those who need them least.

Tax cuts by the Liberal and Conservative governments of the past ten years have gutted the federal coffers of tens of billions dollars--billions that would have provided a budget designed to maintain public infrastructure, social programs, universal child care, and a solid backstop for the CBC.

The source of Canada's huge deficit cannot be attributed to necessary spending on public programs--the source is tax cuts and this kind of neo-conservative ideology has taken Canada backwards. This coming budget should be the means of restoring and even increasing funding to the social programs which have always identified Canada as a democracy, in the true sense of the word.

Sheila Paterson  
North Vancouver

## Health innovation

Stop the presses: "Health innovation starts at home, Falcon says" This is news?

Where has BC's Health Minister been hiding for the last 20 years? Academics, healthcare providers, seniors and countless others have all but shouted that message for years: Prevention is one of the answers to spending our healthcare budget wisely!

Congratulations to the Minister though, better he learned this thing later than not at all.

So when seniors studied the budgets, we saw nothing that will significantly address the growing poverty amongst children and seniors (balanced meals cannot happen when there are not enough dollars to stretch around).

Nothing that increases the number of longterm care beds. Nothing in terms of improved homecare that would see folks stay in their own homes and communities. Nothing in terms of age-friendly cities initiatives that keep neighbourhoods and communities healthy and vibrant. Nothing in terms of thawing the freeze on gaming grants to community initiatives. I could go on [with cut-backs to physical education in schools for example] and on...

This 'light bulb moment' of the minister illustrates only too well that adhoc managing of the health portfolio has to stop and a more holistic approach implemented.

Until then, the Hon. Falcon's 'Ah ha' minute makes mine a 'Ha, ha' one. Unfortunately the laugh seems to be on us.

Gudrun Langolf  
Vancouver

# United Way's consultations on home support program fall far short

By Art Kube,  
Past President, COSCO

Last fall the Ministry of Health announced major cutbacks in community home support programs. In the Fraser Health Authority alone they amounted to \$400,000. A program which was successfully run for 19 years by the Langley Seniors Centre had its funding completely cut. Five hundred closed-in seniors lost their quality home support. Shortly after comes a big announcement. The Ministry of Healthy Living and Sports, in co-operation with the United Way, will introduce a new Non-Medical Home Support Program, first as a pilot project in a number of communities and subsequently on a broader scale.

Indications were that it would largely be run by volunteers and by college and university students who would be paid \$10 an hour. When questions were raised about qualifications, the answer was that the students would come from the Nursing Program of the educational institutions. The tasks of a home support worker are very different from the tasks of a nurse and not very compatible.

At the Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations, we became quite alarmed. COSCO, for at least eight years, has done considerable anecdotal and academic research into the feasibility of universal home care and home-support and their effects on seniors well-being. COSCO as an organization knew more about the ins and outs of home support than the Ministry of Healthy Living and Sports and the United Way combined, and the sad part was that

they knew it. We had considerable discussion with staff of the United Way and up to the Ministerial level at Healthy Living and Sports.

Wanting to maintain a good relationship of long standing, COSCO asked for a meeting with Michael McKnight the President of the United Way to deal with our relationship with the United Way and its role with the government's Non-Medical Home Support Program. At the start of the meeting McKnight pointed out to me and Sylvia MacLeay that he was not prepared to work on a closer relationship such as a seniors' participation department, similar to the present Labour Participation Department.

When we raised our concerns about Non-Medical Home Support he became quite agitated and told us that it was none of our business. He said he would have a COSCO representative on a consultative committee. That was the end of the meeting.

We didn't hear from the United Way until March 2010 when COSCO was invited to an information meeting about the Community Action for Seniors' Independence program.

We were told that the program was put together after major consultations with seniors' groups. COSCO, the biggest seniors groups by multiples, was never consulted. In Newton, we talked with the President of the seniors society and she never heard of it, and that is the place where there is supposed to be a pilot project. In the case of a COSCO affiliate, they talked to the executive director and completely left out the President of the Organization. In Langley, which had its funding eliminated the implemen-

tation team didn't talk to any one. Then they told us that the program was put together with the principle of, "Don't plan for seniors – Plan with seniors." The things we were told bordered on lies and were full of hypocrisy.

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*"COSCO, the biggest seniors' group by multiples, was never consulted.... In Langley, which had its funding eliminated, (they) didn't talk to anyone."*

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McKnight of the United Way is gullible, but the Liberal provincial government is the culprit. It does not have a vision to deal with the changing demographics and health care costs and uses gimmicks, fancy expensive brochures and empty slogans trying to score some political points and at the same time hurting vulnerable seniors. As a first step to clean up the mess, COSCO recommends that the Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport reinstate all the home support funding cut by the Ministry of Health and use the experience gained to move towards a Danish model of home-care and home-support.

We wonder how the 500 vulnerable seniors feel about their MLA and Minister of Health, Mr. Falcon, cutting their home support program. When will the government understand home-care and home-support are all about health promotion, accident and illness prevention, that moving home support from one ministry to another is only playing smoke and mirrors?



# Chance encounter with an observant spinal neurosurgeon results in an unexpected diagnosis and speedy treatment

**By Art Kube, President  
National Pensioners and  
Senior Citizens' Federation**

If you have the symptoms listed in this article, there is a possibility you might have Spinal Stenosis.

Spinal Stenosis is a narrowing of the spinal canal brought on by, among other things, osteoarthritis or degenerative back injury brought about by aging. The narrowing of the spinal canal causes pressure on the spinal cord, which then causes back pain.

This scribe has had Spinal Stenosis. After 24 visits to a chiropractor, a visit to an orthopedic surgeon and a prescription of anti-inflammatory pills, the pain only got worse.

At the advice of friends, off I went to an acupuncturist. After one visit the pain started to subside; after subsequent visits the pain in my back and my legs started to disappear, but I started to develop some weakness in my legs and some mild bladder control problems.

I was so happy that the pain had disappeared that I hardly noticed the new problems with my bladder and the weakness in my legs. Nevertheless, the problem got worse.

I went to my family doctor who prescribed Maxi-Flow and absorbent pads for the bladder problems

and some walking for the weakness in the legs.

I learned to cope with the bladder problem, but the weakness just got worse, and I graduated from a walk-in cane to a four wheeled walker.

Things became so bad that some days I had to go on all fours up the stairs to the bedroom. But, taking my responsibility as President of the National Pensioners and Senior Citizens' Federation seriously, I undertook a scheduled trip to Ottawa to attend a national round table on "Seniors and Volunteerism."

The round table was very interesting; however, I had to get up every half hour and exit to the washroom.

During a coffee break the chap sitting beside me who had observed me getting up and exiting frequently asked me if I had a problem. I explained to him my problem.

After carefully listening, he asked me when I would get home. I told him I would be home late that night, to which he responded, "First thing tomorrow morning go to Emergency and get yourself admitted because the nerves in the spinal cord are shutting down your body functions."

He explained that he was a Spinal Neurosurgeon and that my problem required speedy attention, that there could be dire consequences if my problem wasn't expeditiously

attended to. He even gave me the name of a colleague at the Vancouver General Hospital (VGH) Spinal Unit.

Next morning, back in Vancouver, I visited my family physician, telling him the advice I had received from the Spinal Neurosurgeon in Ottawa.

My doctor ordered some hospital pre-admission tests for me, and he undertook to contact the VGH specialist whose name was given to me in Ottawa.

Two days later I received a phone call from my doctor who told me that he had consulted with the specialist in question and that both agreed that I had to admit myself into VGH Emergency.

Next morning I was admitted into Emergency and I had an MRI. The following morning, I was operated on by a Spinal Neurosurgeon.

After two and a half weeks in hospital I'm now recuperating at home. The operation was completely successful. The bladder is functioning properly. The weakness in my legs is gone. And I can move my big toe. I walk each day about half a mile, and I can now climb the stairs. Furthermore, the doctor tells me that I can travel again.

The reason I'm telling this story is because I had never heard about the serious implications which can result from Spinal Stenosis.

In most instances, one does not connect bladder problems with the back, and, in my case, my orthopedic surgeon did not warn me of the effects of Spinal Stenosis on other body functions.

Now back to work, thanks to that Spinal Neurosurgeon at the Ottawa Round Table.

## **THE FIGHT IS ON**

# **Food industry vs. Medical community**

**By Norbert Boudreau**

Did you know that for the typical adult, the body needs no more than 1,500 mg of sodium per day to regulate fluids and blood pressure, and to keep muscles and nerves running smoothly? Would you be surprised to hear that on average Canadians consume over 3,000 mg of sodium on a daily basis, thus exceeding the 2,300 mg limit per day? Let's put this into perspective. Six grams or about one teaspoon of salt contains about 2,300 milligrams of sodium.

Excess sodium consumption is causing major health problems. It leads to high blood pressure which causes stroke, heart disease and kidney disease. It is also associated with increased risk of stomach cancer, osteoporosis and asthma.

And you think that you can ditch the salt shaker that sits on your kitchen table and all will be well? Wrong. It's not nearly enough to bring our sodium intake to the recommended level of the Canada Food Guide. About 75 to 80 % of our salt consumption comes from convenience or pre-packaged frozen and ready-to-eat food. Without even counting the obvious salty chips, or similar snacks, the culprits include pizzas, microwave dinners, hotdogs and hamburgers.

Wonder why Canadians consume sodium in unacceptable quantity? Salt has been used as a preservative since the dawn of civilization. It is also used to add flavour to food. The fight is on between the food industry and the medical community. Med-

ical experts are seeking more urgent solutions to address the problem while industry wants to reduce the salt content slowly, making sure the reduction is gradual for the consumer.

Would the reduction of salt compromise food safety? It hasn't proven to be the case in Britain. In 2002, they embarked on reducing sodium consumption by 40% over a decade. It is well on its way to meet this target. Why can't we do the same!

Would we miss salt? Of course we would at first. However it doesn't take long for our taste buds to get accustomed to real food. For some, a large amount of salt is poison. Sodium is a hidden, silent killer and is contributing to unnecessary deaths.

## **Membership Application**

**Please mail to the address below**

- ☐ I wish to join COSCO as an Associate Member. I enclose my \$25 membership fee.
- ☐ I wish to make a donation to COSCO. Please find enclosed a cheque for \$\_\_\_\_\_.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
(PLEASE PRINT)

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Fax: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

- Please make cheques payable to COSCO.
- Mail your application to Ernie Bayer, Membership Secretary,  
6079 - 184 A Street, Surrey, BC V3S 7P7 604 576-9734.
- Seniors groups or organizations wishing information about joining COSCO should write or phone Ernie Bayer and request a membership package.