

Professional Employees Association 2010 Scholarship Program Essay

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The current economic downturn has resulted in reduced revenue for the provincial government; as a result there are reduced funds with which to run government services. Reduced funding impacts both the social and environmental related services supplied by government. I will focus on the impacts of these cuts on the environmental services. The effects of these funding cuts on other unionized services provided by the government such as health care, education, transportation and welfare must not be forgotten. These impacts directly affect both the unionized public sector workers and the public they are dedicated to serve.

Funding cuts will most often result in the loss of workers through job cuts as well as attrition, in which vacated positions remain unfilled. The loss of workers creates a domino effect in the work place in which work is pushed back into subsequent years, as the number of important projects becomes larger than the number of available workers to complete them. With a lack of workers in a given sector and the continuous piling up of projects necessary to that field, a continuous ripple effect will be felt by both workers and the public they serve.

Secondly reduced funding may result in new governmental organization structures. An example of this could be the combining of regional branches into super regions in order to reduce administrative, capital and leasing costs. Although the merging of branches may be fiscally appropriate, its detriments may hold more weight. Having more workers under less administration can cause much distress in the workplace with inappropriate use of talent. With the use of super regions, transportation may become a greater issue as workers locations may

become further from the environmentally sensitive areas they need to work on. These additional costs must be considered when looking to rework governmental structures.

Cuts to funding may also require more creativity in the workplace. Workers will have to come up with unique ways of creating cost effective solutions to the problems they are now facing in the workplace as a result of the lack of funding. This need for creativity in the workplace can also result in positive cooperation of different sectors to gain efficiencies. For example the Resource Management Coordination Project (RMCP)<sup>1</sup> is a project in which various resource based ministries share resources as well as staff in order to gain greater efficiencies. The opportunity for creativity and cooperation in the workplace is one potential benefit to staff resulting from funding cuts.

Another creative response to the lack of funding may be increased partnering with non-profit groups, the private sector or other levels of government in order to achieve all that needs to be done. An example of this could be having local stream keeper associations take water samples from the streams they are interested in and providing the results to the appropriate government agency. For other issues it may lead to the government “off loading” work to the permit holders or other levels of government. Although this can be problematic as government loses control over the quality of the work and the motivations of these other groups may not be exactly the same as that of the government.

With fewer staff another creative solution is to only inspect a smaller percentage of all the permitted sites. For example if two government worker previously inspected all the

1. Personal Communication, Hubert Bunce, Ministry of Environment.

permitted discharge facilities they are responsible for every two years and one is laid off, obviously each site can only be inspected once every four years now. Alternately government could choose to only do audit inspections where they only sample a representative group of the sites and trust that non-inspected sites are complying to the same degree as those that are inspected.

Obviously with fewer workers and no substantial change in the volume of environmental work that needs to be undertaken, the amount of work for each public sector worker increases. If increased workloads become too great this can lead to stress amongst employees which in turn may lead to increase sickness and leave or in the worst case, worker burn out.

Another concern related to the funding cuts is that, with job losses through layoff and attrition and the associated lack of hiring, there are fewer job opportunities for new people who want to serve the public through a government job. As a result there are fewer new government workers to learn and be mentored by older more experienced employees. This can subsequently result in problems with the continuity of government knowledge and succession planning.

Government funding cuts are also expected to have substantial impacts on the general public that expect and receive government services. As a result of having fewer public sector workers it may take longer to get jobs done in the public sector. The time taken to assess and process applications will increase as will the time taken to issue government documents such as limited entry hunting licenses or waste discharge permits. If the public becomes too impatient with the government they may decide to go ahead without government permission leading to poor or unregulated management of our precious natural resources. Alternately in frustration the

public may call for the private owned sectors to take more responsibility for activities previously under the control of government.

The public can also expect less rigorous environmental protection from the services provided by the resource ministries. From forestry to environmental issues, a longer wait for governmental service is almost guaranteed. This may cause public distrust and a lower standard of service in the work of the public sector in British Columbia. These delays may also hinder future investment and development in the province as prospective investors may be deterred by postponements to their development plans and invest elsewhere.

Finally the reduction of funding in the unionized public sector will affect the people it serves by reducing environmental testing. With the reduction of testing, environmental problems will become less obvious and may create larger, longer term problems as a consequence of being undetected and untreated. Recently I have heard on the radio<sup>2</sup> that due to budget cuts and staff shortages the Ministry of Environment has not be able to follow up completely on elevated levels of formaldehyde first measured two years ago in a neighbourhood in Prince George. With less environmental oversight it is more likely that these scenarios will occur the longer underfunding of environmental protection continues.

During the economic downturn British Columbia is currently experiencing, it has become a natural reaction of the government to tighten financing of the unionized public sector.

Although the response is natural, it may not be the correct choice in the long term. It is with a short term view that the government cuts funds and they must realize the lasting effects of these

2. CBC Radio News Vancouver, *The Early Addition*, Rick Cluff, March 8, 2010.

actions on their workers, the public and the environment. Some consequences of these short term savings may only lead to larger more expensive problems in the future. With the current reductions in funding not only are public sector workers affected, the public and the environment they serve will also suffer greatly.