

Colleges hoping for a piece of the pie

BY ANNIE MCLEOD, LEADER-POST JANUARY 23, 2009

While it's still unknown what the federal budget will bring, colleges across the country -- including here in Saskatchewan -- are hoping for a piece of the pie.

On Thursday, the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) released a list of 120 college and institute repair, expansion, and upgrade projects that are ready to launch if the federal government makes funding available.

The projects listed require \$2.12 billion and were identified recently through a survey of ACCC's 150 members. Two colleges in Saskatchewan were included.

Parkland Regional College in Melville needs \$5.6 million to construct a trades and skills training centre. Great Plains College in Swift Current requires \$475,000 to convert an existing power plant to a teaching lab for power engineering, instrumentation, refrigeration and electrical programs.

James Knight, president of ACCC, said the two Saskatchewan projects are exceptional, especially with the huge demand for skilled trades in the province. "The people who come out of both those programs will be employed immediately, regardless of the recession," he said. "These jobs are available now."

He said because of Saskatchewan's strong economy, all kinds of jobs are available, allowing people without post-secondary education to find a reasonably well-paying job. However, with the drop in the price of oil and potash, Knight said this will become more difficult to do. "So what will these folks do?" he said. "They'll probably want to acquire the advanced skills that a college can offer them to secure their career for the long-term."

Knight said the list of projects is something ACCC has produced over the past few months, and it's been shared with federal ministers and members of parliament for discussion. "We think they're important opportunities," he said. "The country is suffering from a shortage of advanced skills."

All the projects across Canada reflect growth in demand for extended or new advanced skills programs, and Knight said government investment in the projects will help the economy now and in the future.

"The stimulus package is in part intended to create jobs now, to help us through this recession, but it's extremely important to get some long-term benefit," he said. "In our opinion, creating graduates with advanced skills that will support the economy into the future and increase our productivity is a great long-term benefit."

Knight also added it's traditionally been difficult for colleges to compete with universities for funding. "Certainly the universities have been more favoured, historically, but I think more and more business people, more and more government people, are realizing that the practical job-focused skills of a college education are in enormous demand," he said.

Attempts were made to reach the presidents of Parkland Regional College and Great Plains College.

Neither was available.

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