

LaGrange resists Opposition calls to rescind mass layoffs

The Canadian Press

EDMONTON
Alberta's education minister, in her first public comments since laying off more than 20,000 people in an email on the weekend, resisted Opposition calls to reverse her decision.

Adriana LaGrange also declined to say why she ordered the layoffs despite promising two weeks earlier to keep full education funding in place for the rest of the school year — but she noted the COVID-19 crisis is a fluid situation.

"We are in unprecedented times, and both governments and businesses are making difficult decisions," LaGrange told the legislature in question period Tuesday.

"This pandemic has changed how our education system functions and, like the private sector, we are still adapting to this new reality. This is a temporary measure that will be reversed when classes resume."

LaGrange closed schools on March 15 due to the novel coronavirus outbreak, but at that time announced funding would stay whole.

On Saturday afternoon, as schools geared up to begin virtual at-home programming for thousands of students, she directed school boards to lay off more than 20,000 support staff, including substitute teachers, school bus drivers and educational assistants who work with special-needs students.

LaGrange said the resources were not needed in the switch to

virtual schooling and the estimated \$128 million saved could be used to fight COVID-19.

Contracts for educational assistants must be concluded by the end of April and reduced use of substitute teachers is to begin Wednesday.

United Conservative Premier Jason Kenney, speaking at a pipeline announcement in Calgary, said the province can't afford to pay bus drivers while buses are parked and janitors while schools are closed. They are in the same situation as laid off workers in other industries, he said.

"I don't ... think it's reasonable to ask people in the private sector who have lost their jobs because of the public health orders to pay for salaries of folks in the public sector who've lost their jobs."

"We're all in this together." NDP Opposition Leader Rachel Notley said educational assistants are even more critical now to help students with learning challenges adapt to online schooling.

"They're working every day to provide routine and support and to ensure that these kids don't fall behind," said Notley.

"Parents know they (LaGrange and the government) are wrong, and they feel betrayed."

Tuesday was the first time the Alberta legislature has sat since March 20. Kenney has kept the spring sitting going but is only recalling the house to pass emer-

gency legislation tied to the outbreak.

Government house leader Jason Nixon introduced three bills to give legislative teeth to previous announcements on enforcing health rules, protecting renters and reclaiming orphan wells.

Alberta is under a public health emergency.

Members of the legislature kept their social distance in the house under a cross-party agreement.

Earlier in the day, Nixon said the UCP and NDP agreed to reduce their numbers proportionately while still maintaining the 20-member quorum needed to run the 87-member house.

During question period, members on both sides sat one empty chair away from each other. There were 31 from the UCP and seven NDPers.

Deena Hinshaw, Alberta's chief medical officer of health, has directed that public gatherings be no larger than 15 people. But all 87 members could still sit in the legislature because the government is deemed an essential service.

Also on Tuesday, Hinshaw reported 64 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the total in the province to 754.

She added that another resident also died at Calgary's McKenzie Towne Continuing Care Centre, bringing the number of deaths in the province to nine.



Adriana LaGrange

World hungry for Canadian grain amid pandemic

The Canadian Press

Canadian grain is in high demand as shippers try to feed a growing appetite from mills and governments seeking to shore up staple reserves amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Grain shipments at the Port of Thunder Bay in Ontario doubled year over year in March, with vessels loading 200,000 tonnes last week and higher volumes expected to continue, the Chamber of Marine Commerce said.

"Right now, we expect April grain volumes to be above normal. We currently have 650,000 metric tons of grain in storage ready to go out and we are receiving more rail deliveries," Thunder Bay Port Authority CEO Tim Heney said in a release.

Richardson International Ltd., Canada's largest grain handler, says demand for wheat and durum at flour mills and pasta plants around the world is on the rise as customers stock up on staples, partly in preparation for extended lockdowns triggered by steps taken to contain the novel coronavirus.

"Demand was already up in countries like Italy which had a smaller crop last year but with the COVID-19 pandemic, some countries are ordering extra wheat and durum to increase their reserves and satisfy this new demand," said Carsten Bredin, who runs Richardson's grain merchandising.

Canadian National Railway Co. chief executive JJ Ruest said earlier this month that demand for grain has been particularly strong over the past month.

Shipments of the bulk product will likely stay "solid" at least through May, despite sagging container volumes and potential layoffs at the railway as global supply chains wobble, he said.

"The month of April will not be as strong as the month of March," Ruest said on a conference call with analysts, referring to total freight volume. "As we go on, we're going to be parking more equipment, we're going to be parking more rail cars."

Wade Sobkowich, who heads the Western Grain Elevator Association, said strong demand in Europe and Africa is a welcome follow to a tough year that saw rail blockades, mudslides, labour action and a late harvest depress traffic of bulk goods.

Imperial Oil cutting spending plans for 2020 by \$1 billion

The Canadian Press

Imperial Oil Ltd. is reducing its spending for this year by \$1 billion, including a \$500-million cut to its capital spending plan as it deals with the COVID-19 pandemic and crash in oil prices.

The company says its capital budget for this year is now set at \$1.1 billion to \$1.2 billion, down from its original guidance for between \$1.6 billion and \$1.7 billion.

Imperial also says it has found opportunities to reduce operating spending by \$500 million compared with last year.

It is the latest company in the oilpatch to slash its capital spending plan for this year as



the price of oil has tanked due to the pandemic and a oil price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia.

The company says the impact of COVID-19 and the current business environment on demand is expected to hurt its upstream production and downstream refinery utilization as well as product sales.

Imperial says the steps it is taking are designed to preserve its strong balance sheet, while allowing it to maintain its dividend. However, the company says it is suspending share repurchases.

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Medicine Hat The Gas City

CITY COUNCIL MEETINGS AND COVID-19 PRACTICES

Medicine Hat – The Council of the City of Medicine Hat will be meeting as scheduled on Monday April 6, 2020 at 6:30 pm.

Further to Ministerial Order 099/2020 and to ensure recommended practices from Alberta Health are being followed, Council meetings will be closed to the public. Council meetings will be web streamed to the City website at: <https://docs.medicinehat.ca/onbaseagendaonline>

Remote participation options for Public Hearings are available. Those persons who would like to ask questions can do so via email to clerk@medicinehat.ca between 5:00 pm and 6:30 pm on the day of the Hearing. Additionally, the public may call in to the Public Hearing on 1-877-385-4099 using participant code 9967529.

Dated at the City of Medicine Hat, in the Province of Alberta, this 1st day of April, 2020.

Angela Cruickshank, City Clerk
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Fax: 403.529.8324
E-mail: clerk@medicinehat.ca

www.medicinehat.ca

Local farm food advocate named to council for Ag research

Medicine Hat News

A local advocate for farm and food education has been named to a provincial government council on directing Alberta's agricultural research agenda.

Nichole Neubauer has welcomed thousands of school children to her grain and cattle operation near Medicine Hat and Irvine over the years.

On Monday she was one of 11 new directors and executives named by Alberta Agriculture to "Results Driven Agriculture Research," a new body that will give direction to the ministry's \$37-million research budget.

"I am truly honoured to have the opportunity to serve the agriculture sector in this capacity," she told the *News* a statement.

This winter the ministry conducted a survey and held public sessions to determine a strategic change in research with the obvious goal of providing more producer-input into research priorities.

This new group will replace previous models of the Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency and the Alberta Crop Industry Development Fund.

"Governments shouldn't force ideology on research priorities — research priorities should be determined by industry. Research can be a massive springboard for economic growth and, with the right focus, RDAR can achieve that for Alberta's farmers and ranchers."

The operations will be supported by \$2 million from a Canadian Agricultural Partnership and be led by Ag Ministry official Gerald Hauer as the interim CEO and Alberta Innovates official Clinton Dobson as interim research director. Livestock researcher and veterinarian Dr. David Chalack is the founding chairman.

Other directors announced Monday are Brian Otto, a Warner County barley grower; Tom Steve, the GM of Alberta Wheat Commission; Kelly Smith-Fraser, the chair of Alberta Beef Producers; Stanford Blade, the dean of Agriculture Dept. at the University of Alberta; Matt Sawyer, the Sec. Treas. Of the Western Canadian Wheat Growers Assoc.; Melissa Downing, of the Alberta Verified Beef program; and private sector researcher Vance Yaremko.

Murder, attempted murder charges laid following Kamloops stabbing

The Canadian Press

One count of murder and three counts of attempted murder have been laid against a British Columbia man following a violent house party in Kamloops, B.C.

Court documents show 44-year-old Michael Palmer had his first court date March 29, just hours after a man was killed and three others were injured in a stabbing Saturday

night. Two of the victims, aged 62 and 58, were critically hurt, while a 21-year-old suffered non-life-threatening injuries.

A 59-year-old man died at the scene.

RCMP say all those involved knew each other.

Palmer remains in custody and is expected to appear in provincial court in Kelowna on April 6.

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