

Checking out Lab. West

Jones spends week in Labrador to observe and listen

by MICHELLE STEWART
The Aurora

Spending time in Labrador visiting various groups and companies provided the Liberal Opposition leader with important knowledge and a firsthand feel for what's happening in the Big Land.

Yvonne Jones spent half of last week in Labrador West and says she wants the people to know she is concerned about what's going on in the area; especially the fallout from the downturn in the economy that has hit the twin mining towns.

"I wanted to meet with the unions and IOC, so I would have better understanding of things in light of the postponement of the expansion project (IOC) and the layoffs at Wabush Mines," she said of her visit. "I wanted to be able sit and talk to people firsthand."

The reality of what hundreds of lost jobs means in Labrador West certainly wasn't lost on Jones.

"At Wabush Mines there I am told that among the 130 unionized workers who are losing their jobs are averaging about three to five years with the company," she noted. "Given that I take it to mean we are dealing a lot with the



Michelle Stewart photo

Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones says government needs to finally put Labrador on its priority list and move on the long overdue projects.

younger of the workforce, people of an age that have young families, mortgages, loans and coping with education costs for their children."

Jones says it is a priority of hers to encourage the provincial government to get some projects off the ground as quickly as possible, so those displaced workers have some work possibilities to help them through this down period.

"Most of these people don't have the option to just get up and leave," she pointed out. "We'd like to make it so they can get some employment in this area and there are many needed projects in this area that would help that. As far as I am concerned the hospital project should be ready to go. They should be able to call the tenders on that this spring and have it out. Construction should be started at the beginning of the season as well as construction on the college. And they can finish the Trans Labrador Highway, the widening and the paving of that highway."

Time for TLH action

There are many things on Jones' lobby list for government and she says, now that the federal budget has allowed for extra money in infrastructure funding the provincial government can rise to the opportunity.

"What we are asking government to do is come up with your 50 per cent or 40 per cent, whatever it takes to access the infrastructure money from the feds to complete the TLH and get that work on the go," she said. "I mean we have contractors with dozens of pieces of

equipment in this town sitting idle with no work. Here we are with a couple of hundred people with no jobs. We can get this economy moving in this area with projects like this."

Big Land apathy

Jones says she isn't sure where on the government's priority list Labrador lies, but says there have been several indicators that show it's not too high up there.

"This is a government that removed itself in many ways to what's happening in Labrador," she said of the Williams administration. "I mean, they closed the mill in Grand Falls and six Cabinet ministers were on a plane out there with an aid package the next day. And you lose 130 jobs in this area as well as 200 or so contractual jobs and not one government minister even shows up here to meet with these people. So, Labrador is not a priority on the agenda of this government. What they need to realize is these mining operations have been sustaining the rest of this province over the years and now they are going through a bit of a hiccup because of the state of the markets and the global economy; the

least this government could do is put in some infrastructure money to get these projects going to keep things rolling along."

Hospital not a priority

Jones says she feels the frustration of the people of Labrador West regarding the delays with the construction of a new hospital and questions where that critical project lies on the government's priority list.

"In my world if you are on a priority list, you are getting done right away," she said. "It seems the government dragged its heels on this project for far too long. They announced the hospital here in Labrador West the same time they announced the long-term care centre for Goose Bay. The long-term care facility will soon be ready to open and we still haven't seen ground broken here in Labrador City. I just don't think the commitment is there. I don't think they have made it a priority in anyway and are just paying lip service to people."

Silent MHA

Jones says she has never witnessed, to date, Jim Baker speaking on Labrador West issues in the House of Assembly.

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"I have never heard the MHA stand and raise the issue of the new hospital for Labrador West in the House of Assembly," she stated. "In fact I have never seen him stand and raise any issues on behalf of the [Labrador West] towns in the House of Assembly. If he's raised them, he raised them somewhere else."

Jones says she will lobby and speak out on it because the hospital is desperately needed and the government is in a great position to do something about it.

"The government has the money to do it, they have been running a surplus budgets for four years straight," she pointed out. "There's no reason why this hospital is not ready to move into today. I have raised this in the House and I have asked questions about it. I raised it again there before Christmas and basically asked them, 'why don't you just fast track it and get the tenders out so the project will be started and you can put some jobs up there?' The response was, 'we will have a look at it and see what we can do.' Now that was before Christmas and we still haven't had one announcement on what they plan to do."

Local training

There are a number of ways the province can deal with the slump in

Labrador West's economy and training programs is one the Opposition leaders says should be in the ranks.

"A lot of these workers in an apprenticeship trades program would welcome the opportunity to a block if they could do it here," she said. "Those being laid off at Wabush Mines as well as those being to be off for the shutdown at IOC in July, might not be able to pick up and move out of here to do their block training because of financial challenges and family responsibilities, but if the training as offered here, it would offer a positive thing for them while they wait to get back to work."

She understands

Jones says she wanted a better feel of what issues are of concern in Labrador West and she says she has indeed gotten a firsthand picture of number of justifiable concerns.

She is pleased, she says, with IOC's approach to the unstable global market and glad the mining company opted for what she called "steady approach."

"They are not planning any layoffs and they will continue with their production until July when they go into their shutdown phase," she acknowledged of IOC. "Right now they are not like a lot of companies that are out there acting irrational like laying people off and shutting doors."

Wabush though, she says, has a different situation with layoffs coming in two weeks and the impact of that needs to be, and can be curbed with some government supports.