

NEWS

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Liberal leader visits Gander 📷

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The Beacon

"These things have become the norm, and they should not be the norm," said Yvonne Jones about the state of health care while in the cafeteria of James Paton Memorial Regional Health Centre.

As leader of the opposition in the House of Assembly, Ms. Jones stopped by Gander Feb. 19, visiting the hospital and talking to local politicians and businessmen.

"We can't continue in this province with the number of shortages that we have from hospital to hospital, and still hope to maintain a quality of care," she said. "If they're forced into a strike position, we can see that getting worse, and more demand being placed on the system."

Gander was the last stop on Ms. Jones' trip across central Newfoundland, which included a discussion with local nurses about negotiations between the province and their union.

Ms. Jones said salaries in the province are too low to encourage nurses to stay in the province. One young nurse she talked to from Gander returned home after a year and half in Nova Scotia, taking a five-dollar-an-hour pay cut.

"We're not competitive right now, and if we continue to not be competitive, we're going to have that instability and that shortage in the nursing profession," she said.

Ms. Jones said the Conservative government has delayed coming to an agreement with the nurses to win a better deal.

"They've dragged their feet far too long on this issue," he said. "I think they were hoping the nurses would relent and give up on the notion of getting new benefits for their workers."

On Feb. 12, Finance Minister Jerome Kennedy announced the province would drop some preconditions it demanded earlier in the negotiations, including a four-year contract, which the nurses wanted shortened to two years. Ms. Jones said it's too little, too late.

"Up until last week they've been nothing but arrogant, aggressive, and continuously putting the backs of the leaders of the nurses union against the wall to try to beat them into submission," she said.

The nurses are currently voting whether to go on strike, a process that should be completed in March.

"These nurses are prepared to take a firmer stance," Ms. Jones said. "They're prepared to be tough in these negotiations and they're not going to relent."

The doctor shortage is another health care issue affecting people in the Gander area. Ms. Jones said she's heard a doctor is soon to be leaving James Paton Memorial Regional Health Centre, something she said Central Health should have prevented.

"When you've already got a shortage, you can't allow another one to walk out the door, and it seems like that's what's happening," she said.

Ms. Jones said she's heard some good news from the Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association. More students from central Newfoundland are entering medical school, students that are more likely to work in Gander when they graduate.

"They're only in their early years of med school right now, but hopefully down the road that will pay off for the people of Gander in that these people will come back and practice in the region," she said.

"A bright light on this"

The liberal leader also recently visited Labrador City and Grand Falls-Windsor, two communities hit by closures and cancelled plans for expansion. Ms. Jones said the nature of Gander's economy shields it from such serious blows.

"The economy here is very stable compared to other regions of the province simply because Gander is a government town,"



Shawn Hayward/The Beacon INFORMAL MEETING – From left, Yvonne Jones, Joan Marie Aylward, and union branch president Nancy Dove speak with nurses in the cafeteria of James Paton Memorial Hospital.

she said. "It's not a resource sector town and, therefore, it seems like its avoiding or escaping the economic crunch that a lot of towns are faced with."

"If there was a bright light in this (economic situation), Gander would have to be a bright light because there's stability in the workforce, stability in the revenues, and it seems like there's still opportunities for growth."

Ms. Jones met with Mayor Claude Elliot of Gander, the Gander Status of Women Council, and local businessmen while in town. She said she's heard interesting new business proposals. She said poverty, housing, and health care remain big issues for the community.

The Liberal Party of Newfoundland and Labrador will be holding its convention in Gander on May 22, and Ms. Jones said she hopes it will attract 200 to 300 people.

The Liberals will also take the time to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Confederation, a movement Ms. Jones pointed out was led by Liberal premier Joey Smallwood.

Ms. Jones said her party is preparing its platform for the 2011 provincial election, but for now, the Liberals are trying to come up with a united policy on health care and the economy, two main topics of the upcoming convention.

"We're hoping through those discussions, we'll be able to form some good policy pieces we can take back to the House of Assembly and propose to government to advocate change," she said.

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