

# CALGARY HERALD

## Redistribution of charitable casino dollars sparks battle; Money could go from urban to rural areas

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A high-stakes battle is brewing between the province and volunteer organizations across Alberta, with Calgary non-profit groups and opposition MLAs worried the Stelmach government is looking to transfer charitable casino dollars from urban areas to the Tories' rural base.

The provincial government earlier this month appointed a committee of government MLAs to review Alberta's charitable gaming model and make recommendations for how to revamp rules regarding the pooling of casino dollars, wait times for holding an event and the number of volunteers needed.

Committee members will begin touring the province in early October to get feedback from not-for-profit groups and charitable organizations, before submitting their recommendations back to government by March 31, 2010.

The province has been hearing concerns that groups in rural Alberta are receiving far less in charitable casino revenues -- about \$18,000 each per event in Medicine Hat--compared to the much larger sum of around \$76,000 in Calgary.

"We are concerned that our urban charities could lose much-needed funding to the rural charities," said Leslie Evans, executive director of the Federation of Calgary Communities, which represents 143 Calgary community associations.

Evans insists every penny of the additional dollars raised in the major centres is needed because there's more demands of groups in Calgary and Edmonton, while rural communities have access to other grants not available to urban areas.

The cash raised by the casinos helps build and operate community facilities such as outdoor ice rinks and playground equipment, and also funds programs for seniors and other groups.

"We'll see closures, we'll see reduced hours, we'll see infrastructure go by the wayside," she added.

Government officials are also worried about growing wait times--anywhere from 16 to 33 months depending on region--to hold events at one of the 19 traditional charitable casinos (non-First Nation facilities), as well as the stresses of having to provide between 15 and 25 volunteers per event, depending on size.

Calgary Liberal MLA Kent Hehr says the Conservative government is playing a "shell game" to get more money out to rural Alberta and believes the committee will favour groups in smaller communities.

"It is a way to redistribute money to the rural base. The fix is in," Hehr said Monday, arguing the needs in the urban centres are greater than in rural Alberta due to social pressures that come with growth. "Money raised in a city should stay in that city."

Solicitor General Fred Lindsay said government has heard complaints about the casino model for at least 18 months and is hoping to see the dollars allocated more evenly. He appointed Doug Griffiths, parliamentary assistant to the Solicitor General's department, to serve as chairman of the three-member panel, alongside Tory MLAs Dave Rodney(Calgary-Lougheed) and Doug Elniski (Edmonton-Calder).

"The best-case scenario is a redistribution of funds to make sure everything is handled in a fair and equitable manner," Lindsay said this month.

But Mike Christie, executive director of the Community Foundation of Medicine Hat and Southeastern Alberta -- the region dealing with the lowest level of charitable casino grants--said he's not so sure that redistributing dollars from urban communities to rural ones is the way to go.

Big cities have more pressures than towns, he said, while smaller communities can apply for "all sorts" of rural grants.

"The fact is that an agency operating in Calgary has a much, much larger client base to service than an agency operating in Medicine Hat," Christie said.

"I couldn't say that we necessarily want to see a bigger slice of the action if it meant a smaller slice of the action for other members of the not-for-profit sector who happen to be in Calgary and Edmonton. That's not fair."

In the 2008-09 fiscal year, nearly 3,500 licensed charities earned \$252 million in proceeds from casino events, including table game cash and 15 per cent of slot machine revenue.

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