

WESTCOASTNEWS

HEALTH



IAN LINDSAY/VANCOUVER SUN

Keri-Anne Coll holds son Denny Livingstone at the posh new Richmond Hospital birth centre Friday.

Richmond Hospital birth centre like 'a hotel' for moms-to-be

Facility opening follows 'long gestation,' jokes unit nurse

BY DARAH HANSEN
VANCOUVER SUN

Like any new parent, Richelle Gonzales was apprehensive about the birth of her first child. But after arriving at Richmond Hospital's new state-of-the-art birth centre, she soon lost her fear.

"I felt safe with the nurses and doctors. Totally," said Gonzales, who gave birth to a baby girl, Rylenn Bergson-Gonzales, on Thursday evening following what she described as "a very pleasant experience."

In an interview Friday from her bed in one of the hospital's 15 brand new, private maternity care rooms, the 29-year-old couldn't help but rave about her posh surroundings.

"It's like a hotel for mamas-to-be. Towels, blankets, everything is there. I even have a mini-fridge," she said.

The \$6.5-million project was formally opened Friday following 18 months of construction.

"It's been a long gestation period," Lyn Jones, clinical resource nurse for the unit, joked of the

project.

Along with private care rooms, the birth centre offers a new maternity-specific operating room and recovery area. A six-bed neonatal intensive care unit opened in the centre last fall, funded in part from a large \$730,000 donation from the Richmond Hospital Foundation and its main contributor, Variety — The Children's Charity.

The unit allows most sick and premature babies to remain close to their families, whereas before they were transferred to Vancouver or New Westminster.

Jones said the centre allows new moms to labour, give birth and recover all in one room. Fathers, friends and family are also able to be part of the experience.

"This is a wonderful model," she said.

Throughout the construction period, which began in January 2008, the hospital maternity ward continued to operate at full capacity, with an estimated 1,400 babies delivered during the project.

In fact, more babies were born

at Richmond Hospital during construction than the year before.

"We've gone up by approximately 25 per cent during construction," said Jones.

Keri-Anne Coll of Steveston delivered her son on July 3 amid construction chaos.

Coll and husband Scott Livingstone had planned on an intimate home birth to welcome their first child, but the baby had other ideas.

Denny James Livingstone arrived via caesarean section at 10:57 p.m. on July 3 at Richmond Hospital, where Coll had to be taken following complications during labour.

A hospital birth "was the last thing we wanted to do," said Coll.

Yet, she added, "from the moment we walked in the doors it was a wonderful environment. It turned out to be one of the best experiences we could have had."

The centre, she said, "felt like home — or at least as close to home as I could be."

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OPINION

Eight years later, Liberals find fiscal shoe is on the other foot

VAUGHN PALMER
VANCOUVER SUN



VICTORIA

Premier Gordon Campbell isn't boasting about it. You won't see it on any list of the highlights of his third term of office. Still, there it was in the recent budget documents.

The B.C. Liberals have embarked on a massive exercise in spending and borrowing that will boost the provincial debt to — take a deep breath — \$60 billion in the 2013 election-year budget.

Contrast that record escalation with what Campbell had to say about government debt-loading when he ran for office.

"The NDP doubled the debt," he complained in the New Era document, his 2001 election platform. "It's all borrowed money that will have to be repaid by tomorrow's taxpayers — by our children and grandchildren."

The New Democratic Party government did indeed double the debt, from \$17 billion to \$34 billion. But the latest budget update shows the Campbell government is approaching a similar pace.

If the government hits that not-so-proud target of \$60 billion, then the debt will have increased by 75 per cent under the Liberals, scarcely grounds for staking a claim of fiscal-moral superiority.

Another point of comparison is the debt expressed as a share of the provincial economy, or gross domestic product. There, too, the gap between the records of the respective governments is being erased.

The total debt is slated to hit 26.5 per cent of GDP in 2013, a mere one-tenth of a point lower than the level that the Liberals inherited from the NDP.

As for the so-called taxpayer-supported debt — total debt minus accumulated borrowing by

BC Hydro and other self-supporting Crown corporations — it, too, is on the rise.

The updated budget has the taxpayer-supported debt topping out at 18 per cent of gross domestic product, not a lot less than the 19.6-per-cent level at the end of NDP era.

By one other important measure of indebtedness, the B.C. Liberals are dramatically outstripping their predecessors, and not in any positive sense.

Their New Era document complained that the NDP's debt load "works out to about \$8,428 for every woman, man and child in B.C."

Well, based on the projections in the Liberals' own budget documents, by the end of this term, every woman, man and child in B.C. will be carrying an increased debt load of about \$12,750.

"All borrowed money that will have to be repaid by tomorrow's taxpayers — our children and grandchildren," to quote the Liberal election platform.

Or, think of it in terms of another familiar image from the anti-debt crusade, the debt clock.

If the Liberals remain on track in their current plan — boosting the debt by \$22 billion over five annual budgets (2009-2013) — the clock would show the tide of red ink rising at the rate of \$12 million a day, half a million dollars an hour, \$8,400 a minute and \$140 a second.

All this debt-loading is not without its consequences for the annual cost of running government. Figure another \$1 billion to \$1.3 billion in annual interest payments (based on the range of long-term rates set out in the budget documents), or enough to fund a good-sized program like Pharmacare.

Some questions that may spring to mind if you've been following the Liberal fiscal saga:

First, what happened with all those budget surpluses they reported in the middle years of the decade? Why didn't those windfalls do more to reduce the provincial debt load below what

it was when the Liberals took office?

The Liberals did run surpluses totalling \$12 billion over four years. But they used some of the money to pay off the deficits from their first three years in office, then diverted the rest to reduce borrowing needs for a spate of capital projects. In effect, they spent the lot.

Second, given all the talk of "cuts," where is the government spending all this borrowed money?

The budget documents indicate that about one quarter of the new debt will go to cover the projected operating deficits for this year, next year and the year after. For those years, the government will be spending more on health care, education, and other programs than it collects in taxes and other revenues.

But the bulk of all that new debt is ticketed for the same destination as much of those earlier surpluses, helping to underwrite spending on construction and/or renovation of schools, hospitals, roads, bridges, transit, and other capital projects.

BC Hydro alone is spending \$2 billion a year building and upgrading its power generation and transmission facilities, not that you'd know it from all the grumbling about private power projects.

Transportation accounts for another \$1.5 billion. Schools, colleges and universities get \$1 billion. Ditto health care facilities. Other capital projects take the annual total to about \$7 billion, hence the need to borrow and keep borrowing.

All those are legacy projects, the kind of things that occasion sod-turnings, ribbon-cuttings and topping-off ceremonies for politicians on the make. But as things stand today, it would also appear that one of the biggest legacies Gordon Campbell's time in office will be debt, debt and more debt.

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