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# The Athabasca Advocate

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**BREAK TIME**

Ice piled up along the banks of the mighty Athabasca River on Saturday, as the sheen covering the river broke to pieces and flowed quickly downstream.

ALLENDRIA BRUNJES/AA

## Athabasca University still looking for savings

President says projected deficit makes it 'difficult to imagine' meeting budget without staff changes, like layoffs

**OLIVIA BAKO**  
ADVOCATE STAFF

Layoffs are an option for Athabasca University as the Board of Governors reworks the budget, according to the university's president.

AU President Peter MacKinnon explained that the board decided to rework the budget at a March 23 board meeting, following a memo from Advanced Education Minister Marlin Schmidt to all university staff and students.

He said that part of that reworking could include staffing changes, like layoffs.

"When you contemplate budget shortfalls of the kinds that we projected (for) Athabasca University, it is very, very difficult to imagine achieving the necessary savings

without some changes to personnel, including layoffs," MacKinnon said. "But there's been no decision that has been made with respect to that."

"Nearly 70 per cent of our operating budget are personnel costs," he continued. "So when we face budgetary shortfalls, it's difficult not to include the salary, compensation and other budgets that are involved for our personnel."

No decisions have been made but all issues are still on the table."

In Schmidt's memo to the university's unions and students' association March 11, the minister affirmed his commitment to keeping Atha-

basca University in Athabasca and directed the board to develop options to bring stability to the institution.

"I want you to know that keeping Athabasca University in Athabasca is very important to me and the Alberta government," he wrote. "The options should further our government's intention to do everything possible to keep AU in Athabasca."

The memo was well-received by unions representing the university's faculty, support staff and tutors.

"We have been seeking assurances like this from the government since the university's future was thrown into doubt nearly a year ago," stated

Dougal MacDonald, co-chair of Local 3911 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), in a March 16 press release.

Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) vice president Mike Dempsey called it "very promising" to get something in writing, while Athabasca University Faculty Association (AUFA) president Lawton Shaw said it was "encouraging that the Minister recognizes the importance of AU."

Schmidt had met with MacKinnon and board interim-chair Marg Mrazel on March 10 to discuss the university's financial situation.

In a follow-up interview with MacKinnon, he said he thought the meeting went well.

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**Mount Royal University deficit**

Another Alberta university also recently announced their trouble balancing the books.

Calgary's Mount Royal University President David Docherty was on cleanup duty March 24, after – according to a university press release – “insufficient context” in budget communication to academic units led to an “unfortunate misunderstanding of the budget context” in media reports.

Many of those initial reports said administration was looking for deans to find immediate cuts of \$4.3 million for the 2016/17 budget.

“We are not seeking budget cuts, but rather, rationale around requested budget increases,” Docherty said in a press release.

Duane Anderson, the university's vice-president of administrative services, issued a press release five days later, explaining the university exceeded revenues by \$7 million and the university's previous surpluses were because it had budgeted more than what was actually spent.

**UNIVERSITY**

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If I was to interpret the meeting correctly, it would be that it's time to move on to a closer examination of options and to come up with a path forward,” MacKinnon said. “And I agree wholeheartedly with that.”

He referred back to the June 2015 Presidential Taskforce on Sustainability report, which outlined the institution's situation and several options to avoid financial insolvency, like a business review and an academic review – both of which are underway.

MacKinnon said that after the meeting, the board met again on March 23 and decided that the budget needed to be reworked in anticipation of a possible deficit.

“As you know, (the provincial) government is not particularly keen on deficit budgets, nor is the Board of Governors,” he said. “Essentially, what happened is that we have deferred the budget. We will be proceeding on a ‘business-as-usual’ financial basis for the next little while. We will receive the education reviews and business process reviews at the end of April, and hopefully after that, we'll get clarity about our budget circumstances.”

When asked whether the unions were involved in these budget discussions, he said the unions are always willing to contribute their thoughts on social media and otherwise.

“We deal with the governance of the university under the Post-Secondary Learning Act (which) is entrusted to the board and the General Faculties Council – and the General Faculties Council is a body, a majority of which are faculty members,” he said. “Only they are participating as a member of the statutory body responsible for governance of

the university. They have been kept fully informed of the budgetary situation and they are well aware of where we are at.”

The university is in the middle of contract bargaining with the institution's three unions that represent support staff, tutors, and faculty – the AUPE, and CUPE. AUFA wrapped up bargaining on March 14.

MacKinnon said bargaining would likely go to arbitration, but when asked if that would depend on the final budget or whether a decision would be made before that, he said he did not know because he does not make that decision.

**Unions respond**

Unions criticized MacKinnon's comments about potential layoffs.

MacDonald said MacKinnon's remarks were precipitous because nothing has been settled about money from the province, nor AU's budget.

“He's playing with words because, by definition, that's what operating costs are – salaries and wages,” he said. “Of course that's 70 per cent, because that's what an operating budget is. That's a non sequitur. There will be a new president very soon, and so, really I would say that whatever he says is pretty irrelevant at this point in time.”

Shaw said he was surprised that MacKinnon was talking about layoffs after the minister put a stop to Athabasca University's most recent budget.

“My understanding is that the board met on March 23, and there was a motion passed during that meeting that was a ‘business-as-usual’ motion, based on feedback they'd received from the government,” he said. “The idea was that

the motion was not to anticipate layoffs but to, instead, maintain the status quo until there was more guidance from the government. The question is, what is the board and the administration doing right now if they've been told to put a pause on their current budget planning, and yet they're still talking about layoffs.”

Dempsey said he and AUPE president Guy Smith had met with Schmidt earlier in the day, prior to Schmidt's meeting with MacKinnon and Mrazek, where Dempsey explained the fear that IT jobs would be outsourced or moved to St. Albert.

“We brought that directly to the minister's attention and he said, ‘No jobs will be lost or moved out of Athabasca,’” Dempsey noted. “And he's directed Peter MacKinnon when they met later that same day.”

Dempsey said his understanding was that MacKinnon had marching orders to work with university staff to come up with a solution that did not involve layoffs.

“Peter MacKinnon, in our opinion, has done nothing but continually upset all the employees that work there and have them fearing for their jobs,” Dempsey said. “He keeps saying these things, whether it's the report that came out in June or the report that came out a couple months ago, or even now. It flies contrary to what the government is telling us.”

In a university-wide email sent March 30 and obtained by the *Advocate*, MacKinnon wrote that there would be a thorough consultation with faculty, employees, students, the community and others, and involvement from an independent third party.

“We will have more information on the consultation process, and the appointment of the independent third party, in the weeks to come,” he wrote.

**Atmore Community League  
CRIB TOURNAMENT**April 16<sup>th</sup>

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