Note*worthy*

Premier achieves equalization consensus

Premier Roger Grimes was successful in convincing other premiers at the Annual Premiers' Conference in Victoria, British Columbia, of the need for adequate funding for social programs through equalization.

"My position was clear that I would not agree to a consensus on increased CHST funding unless a consensus was also reached on requests for improvements to the equalization program," said Premier Grimes. "I am pleased to report success on both counts. It is encouraging that all other premiers realize a strengthened and fairer equalization program is important for Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. Equalization is a critical issue, along with the CHST, and improvements to the program would help meet the Constitutional commitment for provinces to have reasonably comparable levels of public services at reasonably comparable taxation."

Premiers will call on the federal government to make immediate improvements to the equalization program including: immediate removal of the equalization ceiling that the federal government has arbitrarily imposed restricting normal growth of the program; immediate work on the development of a strengthened and fairer equalization program formula, including as an alternative, a 10-province standard that recognizes the volatility around resource revenues; and, comprehensive revenue coverage.

Premiers will also call on the federal government to restore federal health care funding through the CHST to at least 18 per cent, up from the current level of 14 per cent. Premier Grimes was pleased all provinces/territories will work together to share information, ideas and best practices for managing health care information and will focus on developing approaches to pharmaceutical management, continuing care and human resources management. Premiers will meet in mid-January 2002 to advance an inter-provincial/territorial action plan for better managing health costs.

2001 tourism season going well

Tourism, Culture and Recreation Minister Kevin Aylward recently updated the province's 2001 tourism performance. The minister stated that the early positive signs indicate this year will again be successful for tourism.

There has been a 37 per cent increase in non-resident tourism in recent years, and overall tourism expenditures topped $600 million last year. Other highlights are:

- 12 per cent increase in direct international arrivals at St. John's airport from January through June;

- seven per cent increase in hotel occupancy rates from January through April;

- 10 per cent increase in reservations through the department's toll-free number over the first six months, with the value of reservations increasing 34 per cent;

- and,49 per cent increase in cruise ship activity.

The minister suggested a number of factors have bolstered tourism, including familiarization tours for travel media, an award-winning marketing campaign, and the Special Celebrations program.

Health of children and youth protected further

Government is moving forward to provide smoke-free environments for children and youth. Acting Health and Community Services Minister Gerald Smith announced regulations to restrict smoking in public places, specifically those frequented by children and youth.

"Children and youth are the most vulnerable people with respect to adverse effects from exposure to environmental tobacco," said Minister Smith. "As well, children and youth who are exposed to second-hand smoke are more likely to smoke than their peers."

The regulations will be effective January 1, 2002. Only food establishments with a liquor licence can permit smoking in designated areas during hours that youth under 19 are not allowed on site. Food establishments without liquor licences shall not permit smoking.

"The ban on smoking in restaurants and other public places will significantly reduce the risk of children and youth being exposed to second-hand smoke," said the minister. "We are ensuring that our young people are able to grow and develop in healthy environments."