

**Speaking Notes for FPSE President Cindy Oliver
Kamloops Forum on Skills Shortage
February 1, 2006**

Good evening and welcome to tonight's public forum on the future of skills training in BC. My name is Cindy Oliver. I am President of the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators which represents over 10,000 faculty and staff who teach in BC's public post-secondary institutions. And I'm also the moderator for tonight's forum.

I also Chair the BC Federation of Labour's Education Committee and tonight's forum is jointly sponsored by both my union and the BC Fed.

Just before we get started I would like to thank Tom Friedman, President of the Thompson Rivers University Faculty Association for doing so much of the organizing here in Kamloops. As always Tom, your help has been invaluable.

We have an interesting line-up of speakers tonight. You're going to hear from all sides in this debate. But we want this to be more than speakers talking to an audience; we also want it to be a chance for you to talk about your own experience on this issue. We are going to try and keep the comments of our main speakers relatively short so that we can get that dialogue started here tonight.

This forum is the first in a series that my union and the BC Fed are doing across the province. We have similar events planned for Prince George, Nanaimo and the Kootenays. Our objective is pretty straight forward; we see problems ahead in terms of skills training in BC and we think provincial policies have to change to deal with those problems.

As the title of tonight's forum suggests, BC's skills shortage is no longer a matter of debate. "Ready or Not" it is already here and likely to get a lot worse.

I know our two main speakers will provide you with a lot of detail on the magnitude of the problem, so let me just give you a brief anecdote that puts this problem into a pretty blunt perspective.

About a week ago the Vancouver Sun ran a story in the business section describing how a major condominium project in Victoria had been cancelled. Although construction had not begun, the project was 90% sold. The developer announced last week that he was canceling and refunding prospective buyers. Why? Yes, material costs were up, but he also said a skilled labour shortage was putting the project on hold.

If anyone thought that the skills shortage was just a lot of hot air, stories like this one puts that skepticism to rest in a hurry. It also provides a stunning reminder that if you don't

have the skills to do the job, the job doesn't get done and that has major economic implications for everyone.

In this case, the city of Victoria has lost \$35 million in direct economic benefit. Of even greater concern would be the impact that news of this cancellation sends to others wanting to invest in Victoria. Think of the other major projects slated for Southern Vancouver Island and how decision-makers behind those projects are reacting to news of this cancellation? I'm sure other developers would look at this news and ask whether their project is next.

Tonight we are going to look closely at this problem and try and determine how we got here and what we can do to make things better.

One of the reasons why we are facing this shortage is demographic. Simply put, the number of people retiring from the workforce is going to surpass the number of new entrants.

Every occupational group will feel the impact of this demographic change. Whether it is blue-collar or white collar, the skills crunch is going to be felt across the entire workforce.

In most media reports that you hear about the skills shortage problem, the examples used to illustrate the depth of the problem are skilled trades positions. The cancelled condo project in Victoria couldn't find enough construction trades to put the project on track.

And in many ways, the problems we are seeing play out in the skilled trades are symptomatic of what many in the labour movement see as a more systemic problem with skills training and post-secondary education.

At a time when provincial post-secondary education and training policy should be making the acquisition of new skills easier, the policies shifts over the last for years have done the exact opposite. They have made it more difficult and expensive for anyone—especially BC's youth—to get a post-secondary education.

Let me give you two quick examples of how those policies have made our pending skills problem worse. The first is skyrocketing tuition fees and their impact on post-secondary enrolments. Those tuition fees have doubled in most cases—tripled in others—over the last four years. The result? Enrolment in BC's public post-secondary colleges, institutes and university colleges has started to decline.

The second is the massive shake up that was made in trades training specifically. Like other parts of public post-secondary education, fees were jacked up, but the real damage in our view was the loss of apprenticeship counselors and the shift to a more de-regulated model for trades training. The result? The number of apprentices completing their apprenticeships has declined by 44% since 2001.

What can we do about these problems? Let me suggest two obvious measures before I hand things over to our first speaker. First, we need to make post-secondary education and training a lot more affordable. That means making significant new investments in our 22 public institutions.

We have a provincial budget on February 21 and we are pushing hard to have those investments in that budget.

Second, we need to have the labour movement back at the training table. Unions have been effectively sidelined, in terms of input, over the last four years and we need to see that change and have our voice added to solving this complex and critical problem.

Getting to the kind of solutions we need starts with a common understanding of what the problem looks like. John Winter is the President of the BC Chamber of Commerce and his organization has done a lot of work analyzing this problem. In fact tonight John is going to preview a final report that the Chamber has just completed on this issue.

So with that I would like to hand things over to John and have him walk us through some of the details of this recent report. John?

As I mentioned at the outset, tonight's forum is a co-sponsored event with the BC Federation of Labour. The Federation has played a very active role in the whole issue of trades training and post-secondary education. Over a year ago, the Fed released a report entitled "Our Skills, Our Future" in which it called for very specific changes in terms of funding and governance of post-secondary education and training.

Jim Sinclair is no stranger to either the labour or business community in Kamloops. He makes a point of getting into every BC community and speaking about the issues that matter to union members and the communities in which they live. I know Jim has lots to add to this discussion. So Jim, over to you.