

HEALTH, HOUSING AND ANGLO RIGHTS:

LOCAL GROUPS SAY QUEBEC'S 2026-27 BUDGET FORGETS ENGLISH RIGHTS, FALLS SHORT ON HOUSING TARGETS AND LACKS INVESTMENTS IN OUTAOUAIS HEALTH CARE

BY TREVOR GREENWAY
Local Journalism Initiative

The CAQ government unveiled its 2026-27 budget earlier this month, with \$170.8 billion in planned spending, with much of the focus on health and education, as the ruling party looks to win over potential voters with a fall election looming.

Quebec Finance Minister Eric Girard unveiled a modest budget that puts this year's projected deficit at \$9.9 billion, down from the \$12.4 billion expected late last year.

Among the biggest ticket items are: \$68.7 billion in health spending, rising 4.1 per cent; \$24.1 billion for elementary and secondary education, which

represents a 2.4 per cent increase overall; \$1.7 billion for economic transformation; \$500 million for Indigenous economic projects; and increased funding for housing and infrastructure.

The Low Down spoke to some local health, education and English advocacy groups to get their take on Quebec's eighth budget under CAQ management.

HEALTH IN THE OUTAOUAIS

SOS Outaouais president Jean Pigeon told the Low Down that his organization was disappointed in Quebec's 2026-27 budget, noting that the \$68.7 billion in health spending doesn't address the region's \$350 million shortfall in health funding.

"We were secretly wishing to

see things in there for our region, of course, but when we looked at the budget and analyzed it, there is nothing in the 2026-27 budget that's very specific for the region," said Pigeon.

"I don't know how many times we have to talk about the underfunding that is affecting

the region, an amount of \$350 million per year," he continued. "They're not putting any more money in order for the region to take its head out of the water. They're also not introducing items to support the workforce exodus towards Ontario."

HOUSING

Girard's 2026-27 budget calls for the creation of 1,000 new "affordable" homes through an investment of \$209 million over three years. However, according to social housing organization Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain (FRAPRU), the funding is "insufficient." Spokesperson Veronique Laflamme said that her organization was pushing for 10,000 affordable homes in the new plan, and this year's budget is a "drop in the bucket" for affordable housing in Quebec.

"It is clear that with \$209 million over three years for the construction of new affordable housing, and \$90 million to prevent homelessness and help people experiencing homelessness on a spending budget of \$134 billion, the social crises of expensive housing and homelessness are not government priorities, even if the budget claims to be focused on the priorities of Quebecers," she wrote in a March 18 press release.

Locally, housing has been at a near crisis for years. A 2021 study

from local social and housing roundtable La Table de développement social des Collines-de-l'Outaouais (TDSCO), revealed that close to 3,000 residents in the MRC des Collines are living in homes they can't afford. The data shows that 15 per cent of MRC households spend more than 30 per cent of their income on housing. The 30 per cent income-to-housing ratio is the threshold used by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) to consider a home "affordable."

OWN-SOURCE REVENUE

\$50.8B

Personal income tax

\$9.4B

Health contributions

\$14.5B

Corporate taxes

\$30.0B

Consumption taxes

\$28.3B

Duties, permits, royalties, government enterprises and miscellaneous revenue

FEDERAL TRANSFERS
\$32.1B

DEFICIT
\$8.6B

(Including Generations Fund contribution)

QUEBEC DROPS 2026 BUDGET FIGURES

PORTFOLIO EXPENDITURES

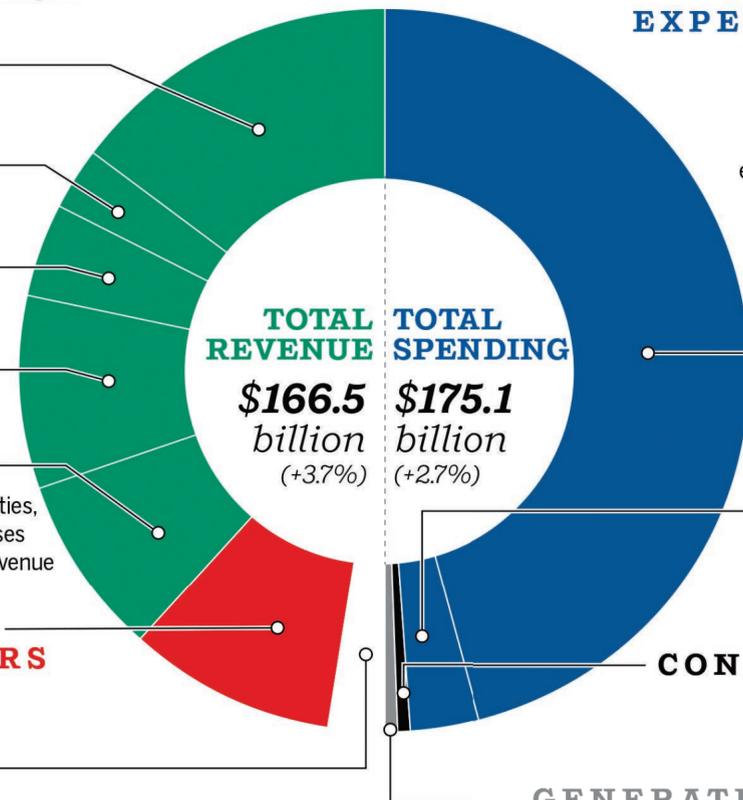
\$160.5B

Health, social services, education, culture, economy, environment, administration, justice and other programs

DEBT SERVICE
\$10.3B

CONTINGENCY RESERVE
\$2B

GENERATIONS FUND CONTRIBUTION
\$2.3B



Above: The Montreal Gazette produced this graphic on March 18 to illustrate Quebec's total revenue (\$166.5 billion) compared to its total spending (\$175.1 billion) for 2026-27. Quebec's budget represents a \$8.6 billion projected deficit. Image: Steve Faguy/Montreal Gazette.

ENGLISH RIGHTS

English rights advocacy organization Talking. Advocating. Living in Quebec (TALQ) is decrying the CAQ's 2026-27 budget and what appears to be a \$2.3 million funding envelope for anglophone rights.

This "is not a lot of money," said TALQ executive director Sylvia Martin-Laforge.

What's worse, according to TALQ, is the lack of consultation between the CAQ government and English advocacy groups in pre-budget talks.

"We felt with Minister Girard, he had a good understanding of

the English-speaking community, and he had the consultations, and people were able to put forth their concerns," said Martin-Laforge, referring to past budget consultations. "This year we didn't have the consultations. Now, everybody's been cut."

She said that a reduction in dedicated funding to the English-speaking community will result in a loss of programs and services for anglophones in the province, although she wasn't able to specifically say what could be affected.

However, Martin-Laforge

spoke a lot about Bill 1, Quebec's overarching constitution Bill that has been heavily criticized by Amnesty International and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association. She said Bill 1 is "problematic."

She continued: "Bill 1 does not have the English-speaking community in its constitution, except in the preamble. We see no protections there."

She said TALQ will continue to consult with the government on potential cuts and impacts to the English-speaking community.

EDUCATION

Quebec announced a 2.4 per cent increase to education spending in its 2026-27 budget, with \$639 million over five years for the elementary and high-school network to meet space needs and recruit staff.

However, none of that money will go towards a new French school in Chelsea, which was supposed to be built by this year.

Ward 2 Chelsea Coun. Dominic Labrie said the omission is "unacceptable."

"Once again, nothing for Chelsea," wrote the councillor on his official social media page. "The school we were promised remains stuck in the 'planning' stage. No progress last year. No progress expected this year. Meanwhile, our families

are waiting. Our children are waiting."

English school boards across the province, including the Western Quebec School Board (WQSB), are in a legal battle against the CAQ over a provision that prohibited school boards and service centres from using accumulated surplus funds to balance their budget.

BUSINESS

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) was also critical of Quebec's 2026-27 budget. With regard to the economy, the budget includes \$410 million over five years to stimulate investment projects, including \$270 million to increase the Economic Development Fund and \$105

million for the ESSOR program, a provincial initiative providing grants and loans to businesses to boost productivity, competitiveness and digital transformation.

"The verdict: A budget that lives up to its name - sober, lacking strong measures to support small and medium-sized enterprises

(SMEs) and failing to address the fundamentals hindering their growth and productivity gains," wrote François Vincent, Quebec vice-president at the CFIB in a March 18 press release. Vincent called the tax burden on small business owners, "the worst in Canada."

The LowDown
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2026
Mia Brun del Re

Mia Brun del Re
Cross-Country Skiing
Hometown: Chelsea, QC

Mia is a 16-year-old high-level cross-country skier. Racing since the age of six, she has gained experience by racing in Quebec and at major events, including this year's National Championships in Mont-Sainte-Anne, where she finished 9th. Last year at the National Championships in Canmore, Alberta she earned a bronze medal in the classic sprint. She returned to Canmore again this year to race among the best U20 athletes in the country for World Junior Trials, placing 16th despite being three years younger than many of the top competitors. She hopes to keep learning and progressing as she works toward competing on the highest stage one day. Mia also aims to inspire the next generation of athletes by showing how hard work, perseverance, and having fun can make all the difference.

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HILLS FOR PEACE & JUSTICE

'Heartbreaking' theft on 'sacred ground'

BY MADELINE KERR
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Three large brass plaques that were stolen recently from the Martindale Pioneer Cemetery in Low are not being investigated as a hate crime, according to a spokesperson for the Sûreté du Québec (SQ). But the history of the Irish settlers' gravesite is one of ongoing hardship, according to its caretakers.

SQ spokesperson Marc Tessier told the Low Down that the three plaques, measuring roughly two-and-a-half feet by a foot and a half, were reported stolen on March 9. The SQ confirmed that it is investigating the apparent theft.

The plaques were mounted near a 12-foot Celtic cross and cenotaph, which was constructed in 1977 and lists the names of the

individuals who were buried in the historic cemetery near St. Martin Catholic Church. The cemetery was filled with the earliest immigrants to the region – families that fled Ireland during The Potato Famine of the 1840s and settled what is now the township of Low.

The oldest two plaques were mounted in the 1970s and are engraved with French and English translations of the Gaelic inscription on the cenotaph. One of these – the one engraved in English – was stolen while the other remains, according to cemetery caretaker Liette Hickey. Two more plaques, honouring the individuals who helped create the cenotaph, were both stolen. A fifth plaque, marking the creation of a stone walkway to the cenotaph, was not stolen.

Tessier said that the police do

not suspect this was a targeted crime against the region's Irish anglophones, but added that, while his force sees frequent thefts of materials like copper, brass and bronze from public spaces, it is rare for someone to steal from a cemetery.

"We do see this type of theft quite a lot, unfortunately – people will take wires from [construction companies] to resell the copper, for example ... it seems likely that this [theft] was about the resale value, if any, of the plaques..." he explained. "It's pretty rare, though, that this kind of theft happens in a cemetery. Usually we see other kinds of problems [in cemeteries] – mischief and vandalism and things like that – but not usually someone taking property."

Caretakers of the pioneer cemetery have vowed to find a

way to replace the plaques, which they estimate could cost several thousands of dollars.

"We wish someone would do the right thing and return the plaques – that would be the best thing to happen. But if the plaques are not returned, we will fundraise and we will replace them. We'll make it right," asserted Maura De Freitas, who manages the cemetery's website.

PIONEER CEMETERY NO STRANGER TO VANDALISM

The history of the Martindale Pioneer Cemetery is one of overcoming adversity.

The original settlers who were buried in the cemetery faced harsh conditions, both in their homeland of Ireland and later when they moved to the rugged, hilly forests of the Gatineau Valley.

The last individuals to be buried in the cemetery died in the early 1900s.

The cemetery eventually became overgrown, and local farmers used it as a pasture for their livestock.

In the 1970s a group of dedicated locals, including Elaine Gannon, Martin Brown and Eddie McLaughlin worked tirelessly to restore the cemetery.

Gannon, who grew up in Martindale, was mother to three small children and living in Low township in the 1960s. At the time, she was pregnant with a fourth child and learned that the fetus was unviable but that Quebec doctors would not terminate the pregnancy.

Fearing for her own life, she spent time in the cemetery communing with her ancestors who were buried there. She told the Low Down that during that frightening period of her life she promised her ancestors that if she survived the ordeal she would restore their final resting place.

Gannon survived the stillbirth of her son and a subsequent medical emergency, but she said she was devastated when she learned that the pioneer cemetery had been bulldozed and the old gravestones knocked down

during a project to build a trench nearby.

She spearheaded a campaign to research the local pioneer families – using church records and overcoming pushback from a parish priest – and fundraised to have the triple cenotaph built in 1977.

"Everyone said I shouldn't argue with the priest. He didn't want me looking at the church records; he said I wasn't qualified to do so. But I knew that he was wrong and I was right, so I just went and did it," Gannon, who is now well into her 90s, recalled, laughing.

Later, a 12-foot Celtic cross was erected near the cenotaph, designed by the Belfast-born artist Eithne O'Kane, who was a personal friend of hers.

Many names listed on the Martindale Pioneer Cemetery cenotaph will be recognizable to locals today, including: Eagan, Daly, Kealey, McCambley, McCrank, McLaughlin, Rice and Ryan.

On Jan. 16, 2021, which happened to be Gannon's 87th birthday, she received upsetting news that someone had driven a snowmobile all over the cemetery. It was "another shocking act of disrespect ... for the early settlers buried in the old graveyard at Martindale Pioneer Cemetery," according to Gannon, who now lives in Vancouver.

Hickey was instrumental in getting a fence built around the cemetery premises. But the latest vandalism against the memorial site is "just heartbreaking," said Gannon.

"The first thing I thought was, 'Are our ancestors never going to be allowed to rest in peace?'" she said.

"This is, first and foremost, sacred ground," she added. "I can't understand what possible interest these vandals would have in the plaques, but for me, when I think of all the blood, sweat and tears that went into getting that memorial and the cross [erected] – it was like a punch straight to the stomach for me."

Anyone who has information about the disappearance of the plaques can contact the SQ by phoning 819-449-4333.



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