by Catherine Morrison

Pop in schools
methane gas study
hotel environmental audits

SOMETIMES PUBLIC SECTOR purchasing is breathtakingly reflective of complex societal issues. Take the case of Grant MacEwan College, Edmonton, Alberta, which recently invited proposals from suppliers for "Exclusive Soft Drink Pouring Rights," in other words, the right to be the sole vendor of soft drinks to young people on the College campus.

In exchange for these exclusive rights, says the notice of tender, the supplier will provide the College with vending commissions, equipment, signage, services, marketing programs, and sponsorship. Of particular interest are "commissions," "services" and "sponsorship" – undefined in the tender, but certain to be the highly confidential core of the resulting contract.

A November 2003 CanWest News Service story on the subject of public school soft-drink contracts makes the point that, "Only a handful of contracts in Canada between public schools and cola giants have ever been made public in their entirety, usually after long legal battles." The comment was made in reference to the story of a 15-year-old from Aurora, Ontario, who successfully challenged his school board's contract with the soft drink manufacturers, winning the right to have the contract contents divulged.

The Canadian Paediatric Society, as well as provincial politicians in British Columbia and Ontario, have called for a ban on soft drink sales in schools in view of an epidemic of childhood obesity among Canadian children, which, it is feared, will lead to heart disease, showing up at increasingly early ages.

On the other side of this issue however, is the reality that educational institutions are increasingly hard pressed to make ends meet, and must cast about for any and all means to stem the erosion of standards and infrastructure. Witness the spate of business programs and university buildings named or re-named for corporations and business moguls in recent years. Deals with soft drink manufacturers has been another favourite tactic, used right across the school system.

Jack Dodds, who helped son Nicholas with the Aurora school board challenge, says in the CanWest story, "I have some sympathy for the school board. They're desperate for money, and I know from attending school council meetings that this money is being used to buy things that aren't frills."

On another breathtaking front, to risk a cheap segue into this next public sector acquisition, Environment Canada has put out an RFP for a study of methane gas emissions from Canadian cattle. And not a moment too soon, given that enteric fermentation (the digestive process that results in methane gas) is known to contribute to "about one third of total agricultural greenhouse gas emissions," according to the tender notice. More than 95 percent of these emissions result from dairy and non-dairy cattle.

These estimates have been arrived at and entered into Canada's Greenhouse Gas Inventory using what is known as the IPCC tier-1 methodology. However, this methodology apparently has a greater degree of uncertainty than we would want when Environment Canada reports to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) on what Canada is doing to document emissions and removals of greenhouse gases from our contribution to the global problem.

Fortunately, Alberta Agriculture has developed and piloted a jazzed-up methodology, known as IPCC tier-2, for estimating methane emissions for Alberta. Environment Canada now wants to see the tier-2 methodology tested nation-wide.

The supplier is required to have extensive knowledge and expertise on cattle growth and diet characteristics, since they will be examining such issues as feed digestibility and estimating emissions there from – important work for the future of the planet, to be sure, though not for the faint of heart.

Service acquisitions around environmental concerns surface in the most interesting pockets of the public and not-for-profit sector. The Hotel Association of Canada (HAC), which is looking for an environmental audit firm to operate the Hotel Association of Canada Green Leaf Eco-Rating Program – HAC's environmental rating program for Canadian hotels, motels and resorts.

The program recognizes the environmental achievements of member properties by awarding one to five green leaves, "one for a minimum of devising and committing to a set of environmental policies and principles; and two through five for results achieved by applying those principles," according to the tender notice. The theory is that environmental responsibility also makes good business sense – that by washing fewer towels every day and encouraging guests to turn out the lights when not in their rooms, the hotel will set an example for environmental stewardship while saving money on water and electricity.

Currently, over 200 properties participate in the program, which has been in operation since 1998. One of the major functions of the supplier being sought will be to grow that number substantially. The HAC cites "future trends in energy and environmental concerns in the hospitality industry" as a reason for increasing interest in the Eco-Rating Program. Given that there are some 7,000 HAC member properties throughout Canada, whichever company gets the job has its recruitment work cut out for itself.

Tony Pollard, president of the HAC is confident, however. He points out that, "participating properties are the largest, leading hotels in the country. Furthermore, most of the hotel brands have already come on board recognizing the importance of the HAC Eco Rating Program."

Catherine Morrison, a writer based in Chelsea, Quebec, has been published in the Ottawa Citizen *and the* Globe and Mail*'s print and online editions, as well as in* Canadian Consumer, Asia Pacific Magazine, *the* Edmonton Journal *and* C.A.R.P. Magazine. *She was a full-time writer/broadcaster for CBC Network Television and CBC TV and Radio, Winnipeg and a contributing editor and columnist for* Winnipeg Magazine.