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## Presidential Perks

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THE official bottom line from the University of Manitoba is that Emöke Szathmáry earned \$355,436.44 during her last full year as president of the province's biggest university.

Documents that universities in Ontario fought to keep private but which are now public suggest that retiring university presidents like Szathmáry might be entitled to more -- a lot more.

In June, Ontario's 17 university presidents agreed to release their employment and pension contracts after the Hamilton Spectator waged a two-year access to information battle.

The Spectator's victory revealed life at the top of the ivory tower can be golden: Universities disclosed a whopping \$8 million in retirement handshakes.

Even though full disclosure is now the name of the game for Ontario's universities, the U of M is not inclined to follow their lead. The university steadfastly refused to divulge details of Szathmáry's pension package.

When contacted directly, Szathmáry, who is working as a professor at the university, says there are no golden handshakes hidden in her contract -- no severance payouts, no bonuses, no extra pension credits similar to the ones on offer in Ontario.

She said she will receive the same retirement benefits as any other senior administrator when she retires for good.

"My contract is a matter of privacy," said Szathmáry. "I

have the same right to the protection of privacy as you."

Szathmáry has returned to a faculty position at the same salary she made as president.

There wasn't much more information to be found downtown at the University of Winnipeg, which refused for weeks to provide details about President Lloyd Axworthy's compensation or his pension package.

Late Friday, a U of W spokesman offered a few tidbits. He said Axworthy is part of the school's pension plan and is entitled to no other special retirement benefits.

But the spokesman would not provide a breakdown of Axworthy's \$282,000 salary.

Only Red River College provided all the information -- and they did so after only one phone call.

"The universities have the opportunity to be even more transparent than they're forced to be by legislation," said Colin Craig, Manitoba director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. "The public has a right to know what public servants earn."

That was the opinion of the Spectator, which began its search for transparency with its hometown school, McMaster University, by asking for the president's contract. After the province's information commissioner ruled the contract must be made public, McMaster appealed to the courts to

overturn the ruling. Before the courts could rule, McMaster abandoned the fight, released the contract and 16 other universities followed suit.

The contracts revealed the 17 presidents were due at least \$8 million in golden handshakes upon their retirement, a figure that doesn't include regular pensions.

McMaster President Peter George is due \$1.4 million paid out annually in \$99,000 installments. Often, retired presidents continue to receive annual pay in their first years off the job, compensation for sabbaticals they were unlikely to take. For one Ontario president, that amounts to more than \$900,000.

The Ontario contracts also contained some unusual perks - low interest loans to buy houses, extra pension credits, guaranteed bonuses.

Officials at the U of M and the U of W point to compensation disclosure documents as the only information they're obliged to release. Those documents are the annual list of salaries of every employee earning more than \$50,000 a year in a government agency. The figures include straight salary, car allowances, housing allowances, club or gym memberships and other payments. But it's reported as a lump sum with no detailed breakdown.

The U of M and the U of W released their compensation documents quietly earlier this

month. They are not posted online and are available only at campus libraries or at the Manitoba Legislative Library. Copies of the report cost \$15.

The reports show that, at \$355,436, the U of M's Szathmary earned about four per cent more in 2007 than she did in 2006.

"One of the priorities of the University of Manitoba, as outlined in its strategic plan, is to attract and retain the best possible students, staff and faculty. To do so requires remaining competitive with other comparable Canadian universities, and, in some cases, offering compensation packages comparable with other universities," said Danakas.

"That compensation is made available to the public in accordance with the compensation disclosure act."

But provisions in the province's access to information legislation suggest universities can release more information and may even be obliged to when they are asked.

In July, the Free Press filed access to information requests for the presidents' contracts - the same ones made public in Ontario. The universities have until later this month to respond.

U of W President Lloyd Axworthy earned \$282,530, a seven per cent raise over 2006, according to the compensation report. Axworthy donates any salary increases back to the university's bursary program

The university said Axworthy gets no severance and no bonuses upon retirement.

"The president's compensation has been disclosed in accordance with the statutory requirements and government guidelines," U of W spokeswoman Diane Poulin said in an e-mail last month. "I've provided what is public information about

compensation."

In contrast, Red River College, the province's second largest post-secondary institution, released all the information on President Jeff Zabudsky's salary and pension.

"Jeff just said 'release it,'" said Colin Fast, the college's communications co-ordinator. "We're comfortable being open about that stuff."

Zabudsky makes an annual salary of \$177,940 plus an extra four per cent in discretionary allowance. His annual pay as of July 2008 is \$185,058.

He also gets free parking at the college, a leased vehicle that costs about \$6,300 a year and half his gas bills covered.

His pension doesn't include Ontario-style payouts, no lump sum severance payment, no straight salary for a year or two and no extra pension credits for staying on the job a set length of time. He does get, apart from his standard provincial pension plan, a supplemental monthly pension of \$706 to make up for the pension he lost when he moved to Manitoba from Ontario. But he gets that payment for only 10 years or until age 65 and only if he remains on the job another 11 years.

The head of the taxpayers' federation is pleased with Red River College's interpretation of the public's right to know. All other post-secondary institutions should follow the college's lead, said Craig.

"That would certainly be a welcome step toward transparency," he said.

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## Personal Privacy Vs. Your Right To Know

The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act must balance a person's right to privacy with the public's right to know how its money is spent.

It says disclosure of personal information is deemed an unreasonable invasion of privacy if the information describes a person's "source of income, financial circumstances, activities or history."

But things are not quite so black and white. When deciding whether to release information, a government agency must consider whether the information is in the public interest, if it's "desirable for the purpose of subjecting the activities of the government of Manitoba or a public body to public scrutiny."

And disclosing personal information isn't unreasonable if the person is an officer or employee of a public body. In that case, it's possible to release information about the person's "salary range, benefits, employment responsibilities and travel expenses" along with other discretionary benefits of a financial nature.