



Speech from the Throne 2020

Delivered on the Occasion of the Opening of

The First Session of
The Twenty-Ninth Legislature
Province of Saskatchewan

Monday, November 30, 2020

The Honourable Russ Mirasty
Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan

STRONG SASKATCHEWAN

MR. SPEAKER, MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATURE, PEOPLE OF SASKATCHEWAN

Welcome to the opening of the First Session of the Twenty-Ninth Legislature of the Province of Saskatchewan.

My government wants to begin this session by saying thank you.

Thank you to the people of Saskatchewan for working together to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

The last few months have been difficult for everyone in our province and there are still challenging days ahead.

My government is urging everyone to continue to do what is necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Follow the public health orders and guidelines.

Practice physical distancing, wear a mask in public places, wash your hands frequently and limit your number of contacts.

We are dealing with the most serious health care crisis the world has faced in more than a century and few jurisdictions have been spared.

Saskatchewan has fared better than many places because our citizens have responded in characteristic fashion – with determination, resilience, strength and compassion.

My government is profoundly grateful for the courage and commitment of everyone working in our health care system.

We have seen inspiring leadership at every level.

In our health care system - doctors, nurses, technologists, pharmacists, cooks, cleaners, maintenance workers, and the students, volunteers and retirees supporting the effort.

We are thankful to all those on the front lines providing essential services.

The people working at grocery stores and other retail businesses, who have found new ways to serve their customers while protecting themselves and others.

The workers delivering food and parcels to our homes.

The truckers keeping our supplies moving, day and night.

The utility workers ensuring we have power, heat and clean water.

Farmers, ranchers and all those working in our food distribution system.

Our first responders – police, firefighters, emergency medical technicians and paramedics.

And our teachers, who have demonstrated their professionalism and dedication as they work to ensure our children can learn in a safe environment.

We are also thankful to all those who have lent a hand during the pandemic.

Everywhere, there have been quiet acts of kindness; solace and comfort provided in our moment of need.

In every part of our province, the spirit of Saskatchewan has shone through once again.

My government has worked to live up to that spirit in our response to the pandemic.

Today, Saskatchewan is facing the most difficult moment of the pandemic to date.

My government's top priority during this session and in the coming weeks will continue to be working to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

In recent days, new public health orders have come into effect, and more will be added if required.

But throughout the pandemic, our best defense has been the selflessness and the vigilance of Saskatchewan people in following the good practices that protect themselves and others.

I am confident that will continue in the weeks ahead as we all work together to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

At the same time as we are working to protect lives, my government is also taking steps to protect livelihoods.

We can, and will, do both.

My government has made historic investments to protect people and ensure our province can make a strong recovery.

In our health care system, my government has invested in more personal protective equipment for front-line workers, expanded testing capacity, and additional staff to carry out contact tracing.

In education, my government has allocated more than \$85 million, on top of a record budget investment, to ensure our children can study safely.

There will be another allocation in December.

Hundreds of new teachers, custodial workers and other staff have been hired, and nearly \$15 million has been invested to enhance distance learning capacity and upgrade technology.

My government has introduced a range of programs to support businesses and workers during the pandemic.

These programs include the Saskatchewan Small Business Emergency Payment, which has provided \$32 million to small and medium-sized businesses affected by the pandemic.

In recognition of the extraordinary efforts staff are making in our long-term care facilities to keep our seniors safe, my government recently re-activated the Saskatchewan Temporary Wage Supplement Program.

This program will provide a temporary wage top-up of \$400 a month for two months to workers in long-term care facilities, personal care homes, integrated health care facilities and to home care workers providing care to seniors in their own homes.

In the weeks ahead, my government will continue taking action to address both the health and economic impact of COVID-19 while continuing to prepare for the distribution of a safe and effective vaccine, which the federal government has committed to deliver early in the new year.

ELECTION

Saskatchewan is rising to the challenge of COVID-19.

This was evident during the October 26th provincial election.

Thanks to the efforts of Elections Saskatchewan and thousands of election workers, the people of Saskatchewan were able to vote safely in a fair and impartial election.

Thank you to all the candidates who took part in the election and the many volunteers who worked on their campaigns.

Most of all, thank you to the people of Saskatchewan for taking the time to exercise the most fundamental right of citizenship.

You have sent 61 dedicated members to this Legislative Assembly.

I know each one of them is grateful for the trust and confidence voters have placed in them, and they are ready to go to work on behalf of their constituents and the entire province.

COMMITMENTS

My government was re-elected with a strong mandate based on a clear commitment – a commitment to build a strong Saskatchewan by supporting the economic recovery now underway, while ensuring life in our province remains affordable for everyone.

A growing Saskatchewan.

An affordable Saskatchewan, for families, seniors and young people.

A strong recovery, strong economy, strong communities and strong families.

And a fiscally responsible government, with a plan to balance the budget by 2024.

These are the commitments my government made to the people of our province during the campaign.

These are the commitments my government will honour throughout the duration of this Twenty-Ninth Legislature.

My government also made a number of specific commitments during the recent election campaign.

Over this term of office, my government will fulfill those commitments, starting in this legislative session.

SUPPORTING A STRONG RECOVERY

Thanks to the sacrifice and hard work of the people of Saskatchewan, our province is poised to make a strong recovery from the pandemic.

That recovery is already underway.

Today, Saskatchewan has the lowest unemployment rate in Canada.

Merchandise exports are growing faster in Saskatchewan than in any other province.

At an uncertain time, our economy has proven strong and resilient.

As we continue to deal with the challenge of COVID-19, my government will take action to support the economic recovery, starting with fulfilling its campaign commitments.

Beginning tomorrow, SaskPower will reduce electricity charges by 10 per cent for one year.

Everyone will benefit, including residential customers, farms, industry and businesses, and institutions such as schools, hospitals and universities.

The rebate will save the people of Saskatchewan \$260 million – money that can be reinvested into the economy to help drive the recovery.

The government, not SaskPower, will bear the cost of the program.

The first bill introduced in this Assembly will create the new Saskatchewan Home Renovation Tax Credit.

Homeowners will be able to claim a 10.5 per cent tax credit on up to \$20,000 of eligible home renovation expenses incurred between October 1st, 2020 and December 31st, 2022.

Homeowners will save up to \$2,100 on the cost of their home improvements.

This new tax credit will save Saskatchewan homeowners about \$124 million and provide a significant boost to the province's construction sector.

The Home Renovation Tax Credit will add to the positive economic impact of my government's two-year, \$7.5 billion infrastructure plan that includes \$2 billion in new stimulus funding.

Across the province, my government is investing in new schools, hospitals, highways, utility projects and municipal infrastructure to stimulate our economy, create jobs and build a strong Saskatchewan.

To manage infrastructure projects and assets more effectively, my government will create a new Ministry of SaskBuilds and Procurement.

The new Ministry will oversee the development and implementation of standardized government procurement processes and information technology infrastructure, ensuring that Saskatchewan tax dollars go further in providing the best possible value for the lowest possible cost.

My government understands that small businesses will play a crucial role driving the economic recovery.

To encourage small businesses to invest in their operations, retain workers and hire new ones, my government will temporarily reduce the small business tax rate from two per cent to zero.

The change will be retroactive to October 1st, 2020.

By July 2023, the small business tax rate will be restored to two per cent.

The reduction in the small business tax will cost \$189 million – money that small businesses will invest back into the Saskatchewan economy to further drive a strong recovery.

By providing a tax reduction during this challenging time, my government is reinforcing Saskatchewan's reputation as the best place in Canada to start and grow a business.

Of course, this has been and continues to be an extremely challenging time for Saskatchewan businesses and their employees.

Locally owned and operated businesses account for hundreds of thousands of jobs in our province.

In addition to the jobs and opportunities they create, they sponsor events, youth sports teams and other community initiatives.

There has never been a more important time to support Saskatchewan businesses and buy local.

That is why my government invested \$6 million in marketing campaigns to encourage Saskatchewan residents to support local businesses, including \$1 million to the Together We Stand Saskatchewan campaign, sponsored by local Chambers of Commerce and other business organizations.

Saskatchewan is a world leader in energy production.

But the province's oil and gas sector has been hit hard by a reduction in demand caused by the pandemic and the lingering effects of an international price war.

Earlier this year, my government introduced a number of relief measures for the industry.

Mineral rights scheduled to expire in 2020 were extended by one year.

The industry portion of the Oil and Gas Administrative Levy was reduced by 50 per cent for this fiscal year.

In May, my government launched the Accelerated Site Closure Program after the federal government announced it would provide \$400 million for the reclamation of inactive wells in Saskatchewan.

The program has been successfully launched and the economic and environmental benefits will be significant.

To date, the program has engaged 250 Saskatchewan-based service companies.

Up to 8,000 inactive wells and facilities will be cleaned up and 2,100 full-time jobs will be created.

In the midst of this challenging year, Saskatchewan was blessed by our farmers producing one of the largest crops on record.

My government will continue to support our growing agriculture industry through investments in research and innovation, through strong farm support programs, and by continuing to seek new markets for our products abroad.

MAKING LIFE MORE AFFORDABLE

Since 2007, Saskatchewan's population has grown by nearly 170,000 people.

This is the fastest rate of population growth the province has seen in more than 80 years.

People have come to Saskatchewan from more than 170 countries around the world.

New residents have moved to Saskatchewan, and more of our young people have chosen to stay in Saskatchewan, because they can build a good life here.

During this session, my government will work to ensure our province remains one of the most affordable places in Canada to live.

We will continue to invest in key public services that support families and communities.

During the last few years, my government has taken a number of steps to improve supports for people living with diabetes.

We have expanded coverage for medications and supplies.

We have broadened the province's insulin pump program to include all individuals with Type 1 diabetes who are under the age of 25.

But we can do more to improve care and reduce the financial burden for people with diabetes and their families.

To that end, my government will expand eligibility under the Saskatchewan Insulin Pump Program to include all provincial residents.

We will cover the cost of an insulin pump for everyone in Saskatchewan who needs one.

My government will also pay for the cost of continuous glucose monitoring for children and youth under the age of 18.

Continuous glucose monitoring, or CGM, is a relatively new technology that allows for the constant monitoring and measurement of glucose levels.

CGM is particularly reassuring for parents, who can monitor their child's glucose levels through the day, or even when their child is asleep.

This program will benefit about 600 children in Saskatchewan.

My government is grateful for our engagement with the diabetes care community.

We are also listening to the families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

When my government first came to office in 2007, the province was spending just \$500,000 a year on services for people with ASD.

Since then, we have increased funding by 24 times what it was - to \$12 million a year.

Two years ago, we delivered on a commitment to provide individualized funding to parents with children under the age of 6 who have been diagnosed with ASD.

Today, about 500 children are receiving individualized funding.

In the months ahead, that number will double.

Beginning in 2021, children under the age of 12 who have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder will receive \$6,000 a year to cover the cost of individualized therapeutic supports.

My government continues to focus on ensuring Saskatchewan is the best place in Canada to live for people living with a disability.

This effort includes making sure people who are deaf and blind can live in our communities with dignity and a sense of purpose.

We have recently improved services for Deafblind people, working with the CNIB Foundation and Saskatchewan Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services.

Funding has been provided to hire professionals who help Deafblind people navigate the world.

During the next three years, my government will build on that progress with the hiring of three additional Deafblind intervenors, three new American Sign Language interpreters, another sign support professional and one additional case manager.

Close to 150 people will benefit from the enhanced services.

My government is also working to improve long-term care across the province.

Fourteen new long-term care facilities have been built and a 15th is under construction in Meadow Lake.

More than 700 front-line employees have been hired since 2007.

But there are concerns about staffing levels.

My government is responding by hiring 300 new continuing care aides to work in long-term care.

Continuing care aides provide an essential service by helping long-term care clients with their mobility and personal care, their meals and their medication.

When the new staff members are deployed, 180 will work in long-term care homes, 63 will strengthen existing home care services, and 57 will support expanded home care services in rural and remote areas.

My government continues to have a cabinet minister focused on issues related to seniors and rural and remote health.

That minister will also oversee mental health and addictions programming in our province.

This is the first time in our province's history a cabinet minister has been given this specific responsibility.

This appointment is a demonstration of my government's commitment to support those struggling with mental health and addictions challenges.

This year, my government invested a record \$435 million in mental health and addictions services – 7.5 per cent of the entire health budget.

Treatment capacity has expanded with a new specialized crystal methamphetamine treatment centre in Estevan.

New detox beds are available in Regina, Saskatoon, Moose Jaw, Prince Albert and North Battleford.

Meanwhile, my government is introducing innovative initiatives that align with our Pillars for Life Suicide Prevention Plan, including a program to train a mental health first responder in every one of the province's 744 schools.

As we move forward, my government will continue to strengthen mental health and addictions services in Saskatchewan.

We will also work to ensure young people have the opportunity to upgrade their education.

My government will increase the Saskatchewan Advantage Scholarship by 50 per cent – from \$500 to \$750 a year.

The total amount offered under this scholarship over four years will increase from \$2,000 to \$3,000.

We expect about 8,000 students in Saskatchewan will benefit each year.

Students attending university and technical schools, along with those enrolled in Adult Basic Education and GED programs, can take advantage of the program.

The Saskatchewan Advantage Scholarship will continue to be delivered as an income-tested program.

My government is also working to ensure post-secondary students remain in Saskatchewan and start their career here after graduation by continuing to offer the Graduate Retention Program – the only program of its kind in Canada.

The Graduate Retention Program provides up to \$20,000 in income tax credits to post-secondary graduates who stay in Saskatchewan.

Since it was introduced in 2008, more than 74,000 graduates have benefitted from the program.

My government has always understood that we stand on the shoulders of our seniors as we work to make this province a better place.

During this session, my government will take action to make life more affordable for seniors.

First, we will significantly reduce the cost of ambulance calls for seniors by eliminating charges for inter-facility transfers and reducing the maximum cost of other calls by over 50 per cent – from \$275 to \$135 per call.

Second, we will increase the maximum benefit paid under the Seniors Income Plan to low income seniors.

When my government was first elected in 2007, the Seniors Income Plan benefit was just \$90 a month and had been frozen at that level for 16 years.

Since then, my government has tripled the maximum benefit to \$270 a month.

Over the next three years, beginning in the 2021-22 budget, my government will further increase the maximum benefit to \$360 a month – four times what it was in 2007.

My government is taking steps to strengthen two important institutions in our communities – the local rink and the veterans service club.

Beginning in December, we are restarting the Community Rink Affordability program.

The program will provide \$2,500 a year to help cover the costs of operating rinks in villages, towns and cities.

It is expected that 635 ice surfaces in 373 communities will be eligible to receive support under the program.

The veterans service club is another important gathering point in our communities.

In Saskatchewan, there are more than 160 Royal Canadian Legion branches and Saskatchewan Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans (ANAVETS) chapters.

The clubs serve veterans and their families as well as the broader community.

They play a crucial role in keeping memories of our veterans and their sacrifice alive and relevant for younger generations.

Many clubs operate buildings that are in need of repair and upgrades.

Two years ago, we introduced the Saskatchewan Veteran Service Club Support Program.

The program is administered by the Royal Canadian Legion Saskatchewan Command and has been extremely well received.

My government will increase the budget for the Saskatchewan Veterans Service Club Support Program from \$100,000 to \$1.5 million a year to ensure the province's veterans service clubs can contribute to the well-being of their members and our province for many years to come.

My government will also fulfill its campaign commitment to help families by adding 750 new childcare spaces over the next four years and by restarting the Active Families Benefit.

Children benefit greatly from participation in sports and cultural activities.

But those activities can be costly.

Our government wants to help with those costs.

The Active Families Benefit will provide families with under \$60,000 annual income up to \$150 per year per child or \$200 for a child with a disability to cover the cost of participating in sports, arts or cultural activities.

LEGISLATION

This session, my government will introduce legislation to better protect Saskatchewan people.

Amendments to *The Residential Tenancies Act* will allow those who have been sexually assaulted in their rental accommodation to unilaterally break a long-term lease.

This legislation aligns with an amendment made in 2017 that allows survivors of interpersonal violence to unilaterally break a long-term lease.

Human trafficking is a scourge that ruins the lives of victims and their families.

My government has consulted with the legal profession, police agencies and community stakeholders on how we can address this abhorrent crime.

This session, my government will introduce *The Protection From Human Trafficking Act*.

This legislation will enable victims to obtain expedited protection orders, allow for the tough enforcement of those orders, and provide civil remedies including the seizure of property and bank accounts and the suspension of driver's licenses.

KEEPING OUR FINANCES STRONG

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a significant financial challenge for governments around the world, including here in Saskatchewan.

Despite those pressures, my government's fiscal foundation is strong.

Saskatchewan has the lowest debt-to-GDP ratio among the provinces.

Our Triple-A credit rating was recently affirmed by Moody's Investors Service.

Saskatchewan was the first province in Canada to table a budget during the pandemic and the only jurisdiction in Canada to release a four-year plan to balance its budget.

That plan is on track.

The Mid-Year Budget Update released last week by the Minister of Finance shows that Saskatchewan's finances are already improving, with the provincial deficit declining by nearly \$400 million since the budget was tabled in June.

GROWTH PLAN

There are many reasons to be optimistic about Saskatchewan's economic future.

Despite the pandemic, the fundamentals of the world economy have not changed.

The world's population continues to grow.

People will need more food, more energy and more ideas on how to produce both.

Our province is in a position to supply the food, fuel, fertilizer and innovation that a growing world requires.

About a year ago, my government released a new Saskatchewan Growth Plan.

We remain focused on meeting the ambitious targets in the Growth Plan.

Those targets include:

Increasing the province's population to 1.4 million by 2030;

Creating 100,000 new jobs by 2030;

Increasing exports by 50 per cent by taking greater control of our trade relationships and actively promoting Saskatchewan exports abroad; and

Investing \$30 billion in infrastructure over the next decade to enhance quality of life and drive growth in our province.

STANDING UP FOR SASKATCHEWAN

My government believes in a strong, united Canada, where every province and territory can contribute to our nation's prosperity and progress.

But we will always defend Saskatchewan within the Canadian federation and we will take our own road when federal policies work against the interests of our province.

This month, the Premier appointed a Legislative Secretary with the job of examining how Saskatchewan can exercise and strengthen its autonomy within the federation.

In September, Saskatchewan took our case against the federal carbon tax to the Supreme Court of Canada.

My government believes the federal carbon tax is not only unconstitutional, it is also ineffective.

Saskatchewan has its own climate change plan – Prairie Resilience – that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions while ensuring our sustainable industries can survive and thrive.

We will continue to fight the federal carbon tax while implementing our own Prairie Resilience climate change plan.

There are other areas where my government is exerting provincial autonomy.

Traditionally, Saskatchewan's Chief Firearms Officer has been appointed by the federal government.

That changed earlier this year, when my government announced Saskatchewan would exercise its right to select our own Chief Firearms Officer to manage the program within Saskatchewan.

This change will allow for the administering of federal firearms legislation in a sensible, prudent and reasonable manner, and give Saskatchewan citizens a voice as decisions about firearms are made in Canada.

Right now, Saskatchewan has one international trade office, in Shanghai, China.

Next year, we will open three more trade offices, in Japan, India and Singapore.

The trade offices will be singularly focused on serving Saskatchewan businesses while promoting the province to potential investors.

My government has discussed with the federal government the possibility of assuming greater control over immigration in Saskatchewan.

We continue to advocate for the sustainable industries that support thousands of Saskatchewan families while providing food and energy for a growing world.

We are world leaders in agriculture, energy, mining, manufacturing and processing.

Saskatchewan is making the world a better place.

CONCLUSION

Today, Saskatchewan is confronting a challenge that is unique in our lifetimes.

But we have experienced adversity before.

How we dealt with that adversity, and what it showed us about our character, should give us confidence in our ability to overcome.

We know this to be true about the province we love.

Saskatchewan is strong.

Saskatchewan people are tough and resilient.

We are steadfast and determined.

We are compassionate and generous.

We put others ahead of ourselves.

We care for each other, come what may.

This is our province.

This is who we are.

Inclined to hope.

Optimistic by nature.

This is how we have overcome adversity before.

And it is how – together – we will do so again.

We will prevail in Saskatchewan.

We will get through this, stronger than ever.

I now leave you to the business of the session, knowing that you will favourably discharge your duties and responsibilities.

May divine providence continue to bless our province and guide this Assembly in all of its deliberations.

God bless Saskatchewan.

God bless Canada.

God save the Queen.

