

SASKATCHEWAN SPEAKS

**Policy Recommendations for
Transformational Change**



**Saskatchewan Speaks:
Policy Recommendations for Transformational Change
March 2017**

This report was prepared on behalf of SaskForward by the Saskatchewan Office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

SaskForward would like to acknowledge the tireless work of all our volunteers and the people of Saskatchewan for sharing their visions for the future of the province with us.

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2016, the Saskatchewan government announced that it would embark on a process of “transformational change” in the services it provides — including healthcare, education, energy, local governance, transportation, and social services. As Minister of Finance Kevin Doherty explained, “All things are on the table right now.” In response to the government’s initiative, a broad coalition of civil society organizations and individuals created “SaskForward,” to ensure that Saskatchewan residents had the opportunity to have their say on what sort of “transformational change” they would like to see in the province.

SaskForward initiated an online submission process on December 8, 2016. We asked people across the province to answer the question, “What ‘transformational change’ would you introduce to make Saskatchewan a happier, healthier, and more prosperous place for all?”

The public submission process was open until January 30, 2017. During that period, SaskForward received 118 submissions from groups and individuals from across the province on a wide variety of issues. The consultation process culminated in a policy summit held in Regina on January 28, 2017. Over 120 participants attended the summit, sharing their ideas for transformational change in seven different issue area sessions.

Through the online submission process and summit sessions, we have developed a series of immediate and long-term policy recommendations based on common themes, ideas and practical policies that Saskatchewan people shared with us. The following policy recommendations are divided into seven key issue areas:

1. Employment, Economy and Public Finance
2. Health and Healthcare
3. Education
4. Poverty and Housing
5. Energy and Environment
6. Agriculture
7. Reconciliation and Decolonization

Each issue area is accompanied by a brief synopsis that outlines the major concerns, challenges and visions for the future that participants shared with us. We follow by identifying policy recommendations that could be implemented immediately to advance those visions, along with longer-term policy goals. These recommendations are by no means exhaustive, they are merely a synthesis of the many policy suggestions we received. Furthermore, given the breadth of the submissions and ideas shared with us, it was impossible to do them all justice in a brief of this size. We therefore urge policy-makers and the public to consult our archive of selected submissions at www.saskforward.ca. Throughout the report, we will also highlight some of the comments we recorded during the summit sessions from participants themselves.

EMPLOYMENT, ECONOMY AND PUBLIC FINANCE

It is not controversial to state that the impetus for the government’s “transformational change” agenda was the steadily worsening economic conditions experienced in the province over the past year. The end of the commodity boom (particularly in oil) has seen Saskatchewan’s Real GDP contract in both 2015 and 2016.¹ The end of the oil boom has also resulted in increasing unemployment, as the province experienced the biggest year-over-year decline in employment in over a decade.² The end of the commodity-boom and resulting economic contraction has also significantly impacted the province’s finances, with the drastic decline in resource revenues contributing to an estimated \$1.2 billion dollar deficit.³

While the current state of the economy is not in dispute, the best way forward to restore positive economic growth and return the budget to balance certainly is. The clear consensus from the submissions that addressed the economy was that deep cuts to public spending while still in economic recession was short-sighted at best and counter-productive at worst. The experience of other jurisdictions in economic downturn that saw their economies contract and deficits expand in the wake of widespread fiscal austerity measures should provide a note of caution to governments that think they can cut their way to growth.⁴ In

“No one ever died from running a deficit, the same can’t be said for slashing health and social supports.”

fact, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has demonstrated that public spending — particularly in economies experiencing low economic growth — can significantly increase output, lower unemployment and actually bring about a reduction in the public-debt-to-GDP ratio because of the much bigger boost in output.⁵ There was also an

abiding concern from respondents that cuts to social programs would disproportionately burden the most vulnerable in the province, forcing those least able to bear the brunt of the government’s deficit-fighting measures.

Many participants indicated that the government's current emphasis on cost-cutting, rather than revenue generation was unbalanced. There was extensive support for restoring more progressivity to Saskatchewan's income tax, as well as support for increased business and corporate taxes and the elimination of corporate tax exemptions.

IMMEDIATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Rather than attempt to balance the budget this year, the government should prioritize returning the province's economy to positive growth — even if this means running short-term deficits. Deficits will be much more manageable in a positive growth environment and won't run the risk of contracting an already fragile economy.
2. If tax increases are on the table, they should be borne by those most able. Saskatchewan should follow the example of other US states that implemented temporary surtaxes (between 1 to 5 percent) and reduced deductions on the highest income earners.⁶
3. Restore a modicum of progressivity to the provincial income tax system by adding a new high earner tier for incomes over \$250,000.
4. The Provincial Auditor has questioned the government's excessive use of consultants. In 2014 the auditor reported that total spending on consultants for all ministries shot up from \$36.7 million to \$120.3 million, or by 228%.⁷ Government should review the use of private consultants in Ministries to determine whether they are truly cost-effective.
5. Any provincial sales tax increase should ensure lower-income earners are protected through a rebate-system.

LONG-TERM POLICY GOALS

1. For economies like Saskatchewan that are highly resource dependent and thereby vulnerable to cyclical commodity price fluctuations, it is imperative that governments develop a sizeable resource revenue or heritage fund that can be used to stabilize the economy when commodity prices crash. The existence of such a fund today would have allowed the government to maintain relatively stable spending levels even as tax revenues fall due to economic downturn.⁸

HEALTH AND HEALTHCARE

Many of the submissions and conversations related to health and healthcare emphasized the importance of social determinants in ensuring both better health outcomes and controlling escalating costs. The social determinants of health (SDH) are the social and economic factors that influence people's health. For instance, in Saskatoon, the poorest neighborhoods have 13 times higher incidence of diabetes, 16 times higher suicide rates and 4 times higher infant mortality.⁹ The Canadian Medical Association estimates that “20% of the \$200 billion spent annually on healthcare, and 50% of health outcomes, can be attributed to the social determinants of health.”¹⁰ This indicates that there is much we can do to improve the health of Canadians *outside* the healthcare system proper. The evidence suggests that the healthcare sector can achieve better health outcomes for less money by spending more of our dollars on work that builds healthier communities, social supports and environments that produce a healthier population. Investing in housing, food, education, built spaces and the environment makes economic sense because they support healthier people, and healthy people make fewer demands on the system.¹¹

The impact that economic policies can have on the health of a population should also be a caution against deep spending cuts as a knee-jerk response to increasing deficits. The social investments that are required to keep populations healthy are particularly vulnerable when governments face pressure to enact widespread austerity measures. The experience of austerity in European countries has demonstrated how economic hardship can result in marked increases in mental stress and depression and increased risk of initiating substance (alcohol, smoking, illicit drug) use.¹² Short-term austerity measures can thereby create long-lasting health impacts that will persist long after the initial cuts to social spending.

Concern with how our system responds to mental illness and addiction was also a recurring theme in many of the submissions, with respondents advocating for more resources and focus within the system dedicated to these issues. Respondents also showed great interest in creating community hubs — public spaces that provide integrated health and social services tailored to the needs of the respective community — as a model for future healthcare delivery.

IMMEDIATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adopt an upstream health strategy that identifies and directs investments to those areas that have the greatest potential to influence population health status positively.
2. Halt health region amalgamation subject to further study and review, with a clear aim and strategy of what healthcare restructuring should ultimately achieve.

3. Pilot community hubs that integrate health and social services at one community site.
4. More addiction treatment facilities/beds and longer programs (minimum of 60 to 90 days).
5. Establish addiction transition treatment facilities that allow individuals to transition back into the community and to work, while continuing to have professional and peer support; and treatment on demand being available.
6. Institute a separate emergency room intake for persons in mental health crisis (including direct access to a psychiatrist).

LONG-TERM POLICY GOALS

1. Commitment to integrate social determinants of health considerations into policy planning across all government departments.

EDUCATION

Many of the submissions and discussions related to education were in direct response to the government's suggestion to amalgamate and reduce the current number of school boards. Respondents were almost universally opposed to greater centralization, arguing for a community-based model for education that would provide greater avenues for public participation in decision-making and policy decisions. Indeed, most respondents wanted to see *more power* returned to local boards — particularly on issues like mill rates and building decisions — as a means for communities to exercise more control over education in their communities.

There was also a sincere desire to see public school buildings function as community hubs, housing a host of programs and services required by communities. Housing services and programs like senior's events, daycare, health and/or dental services, etc., would allow public schools to become the center of community activity and ensure community engagement with local school issues.¹³

In keeping with the theme of local autonomy and opposition to centralization, there was also deep concern over the value and efficacy of standardized testing in public schools. Some expressed concern about the current standardizing testing leading to school-to-school comparisons and linking teacher wages to test results, conditions that would place schools

“Stop chasing test scores based on two narrow skills [numeracy and literacy], and take a holistic, creative approach so that our children are well-rounded, enriched thinkers on every level.”

...serving disadvantaged communities at risk. Others were concerned that constant auditing of test scores ‘unbalances’ the curriculum by placing too much emphasis on subjects that are the easiest to quantitatively measure, i.e. math and reading. The possibilities for a standardized testing-free future include a less pressured school day, with more space for learning, teaching, play, and community engagement.

Prioritizing Indigenous education was also a common theme among

respondents who addressed education. Many wanted to see Indigenous peoples exercise more control over the education of their children, with more representation of First Nation and Métis teachers in the classroom, ensuring that curriculum and teaching materials positively reflect the experience of Indigenous people in the province, as well as providing space and resources for the involvement of Elders and activities focused on intercultural communications. A common call was to ensure the recommendations and Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as pertaining to education are fully implemented.¹⁴

IMMEDIATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Restore funding to the Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP/NORPAC).
2. Restoration of local mill rate-setting powers for school boards.
3. Reduced investment in costly administrative-driven audits and reporting regimes.
4. Reduction of standardized testing requirements in Saskatchewan.
5. Pilot community hub schools that are not just a place for service delivery, but are truly rooted in community stewardship.

LONG-TERM POLICY GOALS

1. Within the public system, allow and support school communities to pursue diverse, flexible, locally-responsive, innovative learning environments and approaches.

POVERTY AND HOUSING

The Saskatchewan government made important progress on addressing the issue of poverty with the appointment of the Advisory Group on Poverty Reduction in 2015 and the subsequent release of the *Saskatchewan Poverty Reduction Strategy* in 2016.¹⁵ However, it seems the current fiscal situation and subsequent program cuts have stalled, if not reversed, progress on this file. Respondents to SaskForward that addressed this issue want to see the government move much more aggressively on poverty, including enacting legislation that would ensure poverty reduction remains a priority well into the future regardless of what government is in power. Many respondents also wanted to see the government entertain alternative means of income security, such as the Living Wage or a Universal or Basic Income.

The issue of housing affordability and availability is inextricably linked with poverty, particularly in light of the tight vacancy rates and rental costs that plagued the province during the commodity boom years. Many respondents referenced the “Housing First” program — which aims to put those experiencing homelessness into permanent housing first, and then supply additional supports as needed — as a model for addressing homelessness in Saskatchewan and eliminating the economic and social costs associated with homelessness. Currently, the program has been adopted in both Regina and Saskatoon but has not received financial support from the provincial government, resulting in a lack of capacity to house more than a few dozen people in each city.¹⁶ Respondents also advocated for an expanded role for the provincial government in building new affordable housing units through the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation, increased rental supplements and the implementation of rent controls for low-to mid-range accommodations.

IMMEDIATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Immediately raise current Saskatchewan Assistance Plan (SAP) rates to a level that meets basic needs and then index to the cost of living. Rates have remained virtually stagnant for the past decade — a period that witnessed substantial cost-of-living increases throughout the province.
2. Provide financial support to Housing First initiatives in Saskatchewan municipalities.
3. Increase access to qualified rental advocates and support services for rental tenants.
4. Pass legislation to establish an Anti-Poverty Act.
5. The creation of an Anti-Poverty Office that monitors and regularly reports progress on key poverty indicators.

LONG-TERM POLICY GOALS

1. Commitment to fund research and pilot projects on Universal Basic Income in the province.

ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT

No other issue seemed to generate as much concern during the consultation process as energy and the environment. Indeed, SaskForward received the greatest number of submissions on this specific issue. While respondents were very concerned with the province's standing as the largest greenhouse gas emitter per capita in the country, people were equally passionate in advocating for an alternative vision of energy use in the province and ensuring the health and vitality of Saskatchewan's natural environment. There was virtual consensus that Saskatchewan should adopt much more aggressive targets in regards to renewable energy, emission reductions, energy conservation and efficiency and that the government needs to adopt a more proactive role in mitigating and adapting to inevitable changes to our climate.

Respondents also emphasized the large role that SaskPower — as a provincial crown corporation — could play in facilitating the province's energy transition. Beyond encouraging SaskPower to adopt more aggressive renewable energy, conservation and efficiency targets, people wanted SaskPower to adopt policies that would encourage local renewable power generation. Respondents advocated for policies that would encourage local cooperatives, municipal ownership and First Nation-ownership models as a means to ensure widespread diffusion of renewable power generation, revenue generation and green employment throughout the province. Many wanted to see a system in place, like a feed-in-tariff, that would reward those individuals and communities that invested in renewable power generation, by requiring SaskPower to purchase power generated by certain

“I see a Saskatchewan in which energy is a servant not a master.”

renewable means. This would provide the security of market access necessary for the renewable industry to flourish in Saskatchewan.

There was equal concern that the government's hesitation to aggressively pursue renewable energy in the

present would negatively impact the economy in the future. Respondents want to see the government adopt a viable transition strategy that would ensure that workers, industries and communities in the province are not left behind as the world shifts to a de-carbonized economy.

Respondents were also eager to share environmental success stories from other jurisdictions that they believed could be successfully transplanted or modified to work here in Saskatchewan. There was a high degree of agreement that Saskatchewan needs to learn from the experiences of other jurisdictions that demonstrate the viability and efficacy of renewable energy and green technologies.

IMMEDIATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The adoption of a transparent, publicly accountable and socially just form of carbon-pricing. Revenues should be used to mitigate the price's effects on low-income earners, protect export-oriented agriculture and fund environmentally-sustainable research and infrastructure.
2. Every year fugitive emissions from pipeline leaks, well head leaks, and the venting and flaring of gas (that is produced as a byproduct of oil) contributes to **17.4%** of Saskatchewan's total greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁷ Much of this associated gas is methane, a greenhouse gas that is 30 times as potent as carbon dioxide. Instead of venting and flaring methane, producers should be required to either use it to generate power for their rig or else pipe it into the provincial gas system.
3. Amendment to the *Saskatchewan Power Corporation Act*, specifying that, in ensuring that power supply adequately meets power demand, new investment should be limited to the following in reducing order of priority: (i) energy efficiency, (ii) community-owned renewables and individual home photovoltaics, (iii) other renewables, (iv) energy from waste and industrial cogeneration. This should be supplemented with investment in whatever mix of other technological approaches (smart grid, power trading, storage) is necessary to ensure and improve grid stability
4. Amendment to the *Saskatchewan Power Corporation Act*, limiting the SaskPower monopoly by enabling local cooperatively- and municipally-owned generation for public sale. In addition, First Nations reserves, which come under federal rather than provincial law and so should already be able to generate and sell within reserve, should also be permitted to sell off-reserve within Saskatchewan.
5. A feed-in tariff scheme, guaranteeing renewables generators (i) priority on the grid, and (ii) stability of price (with a reasonable but not excessive rate of return), with preferential options for First Nations, community-run schemes, cooperatives and municipal projects.
6. Adoption of a soil carbon off-sets program, which would pay farmers for dry-land pasture improvement if they establish bio-diverse perennial grass/legume pastures to improve soil carbon and fertility, soil water holding capacity, and livestock productivity.
7. Develop building codes and retro-fit incentives and/or financing to improve the energy standards of both new and existing buildings in the province.

LONG-TERM POLICY GOALS

1. Develop Saskatchewan's renewable energy workforce by rapidly up-skilling energy sector workers through short-term training programs and expanding apprenticeship programs in the renewable energy sector.
2. Create incentives to attract and develop both the research and development and manufacturing capacity of renewable energy products in the province. Saskatchewan has some of the highest wind-speeds and best solar profile in the country, these advantages should be leveraged to attract nascent green industry to the province.¹⁸

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is obviously ingrained in the very identity of our province, constituting the backbone of our economy throughout much of Saskatchewan's history. And yet, with the onset of climate change contributing to enhanced food insecurity, droughts, wildfires, and other impacts, agriculture will take on a renewed importance in confronting these challenges. Respondents viewed agriculture as the key to both our economic and environmental future, as new innovations and practices promise to return agriculture to a preeminent place in the future of our province.

The Canadian Prairies — home to more than 80 percent of Canada's agricultural land — will be fundamentally transformed by climate change, characterized by greater water scarcity, drought, desertification and fire events.¹⁹ Currently agriculture is the third largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in the province after the oil and gas sector and electricity generation.²⁰ It is therefore critical that agriculture practices in Saskatchewan do not continue to contribute to climate change, but actively work to both mitigate and adapt to it. Saskatchewan farmers have already demonstrated their leadership in environmentally-friendly agricultural practices in their development of zero-tillage. Respondents were adamant that government needs to continue to encourage and incentivize those agricultural practices that can accomplish reduced emissions and increased carbon sequestration — such as strip intercropping and agroforestry — while discouraging those that do not.²¹

IMMEDIATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Align the province's irrigation policy with the reality of climate-changed induced water scarcity. More government coordination and regulation of property drainage.
2. Return to publicly funded, publicly owned agricultural research.
3. Government and public university research focus on low-emission, low-input agricultural practices.
4. Implement a provincial nitrogen stewardship plan.
5. Support the installation of anaerobic digesters and biogas systems.

LONG-TERM POLICY GOALS

1. Incentivize agricultural practices that reduce or sequester greenhouse emissions.

RECONCILIATION AND DECOLONIZATION

Of all the changes that could be made in our province, repairing the historic relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers in this province would be the most transformational. The long history of colonization, exploitation and de-humanization of Indigenous peoples in Canada and Saskatchewan has produced an enduring institutional and personal racism in our province. Steps to decolonize the province and its institutions will force many of us to have to confront some uncomfortable, but necessary truths. Saskatchewan's future will be Indigenous, of that there is little doubt. Demographic projections predict Saskatchewan's population will reach one-quarter Indigenous by 2030, approaching one-third by 2040.²² To continue with the policies of the past will only ensure even greater inequalities in the future and all the attendant consequences those inequalities will bring. However, the size of the task ahead of us should not immobilize us. There are immediate, concrete actions we can take to put us on the road to reconciliation and justice. While we have addressed particular Indigenous concerns in many of the issue areas above, there are two specific policy issues that emerged from the submission process that need to be explicitly addressed under the rubric of decolonization and reconciliation: prisons and policing.

“We’re all treaty people, and we need a province that acts like it.”

Prisons and policing were viewed by many respondents as issues that could not be disassociated from wider concerns of decolonization and reconciliation. Indigenous people are vastly overrepresented in provincial prisons in Saskatchewan, experiencing

some of the highest incarceration rates in the country. While Indigenous people make up 17% of the population of Saskatchewan, they constitute 80% of the youth in Saskatchewan prisons, 80 to 90% of the men in Saskatchewan prisons and up to 90% of the women in Saskatchewan prisons.²³ There is ample evidence of systemic racism in the Saskatchewan justice system driving this over-representation. Saskatoon defence lawyer Jim Scott concludes that Aboriginals in Saskatchewan have been sentenced to well over *twice* the amount of jail time as non-Aboriginals, while Saskatchewan provincial judges have been very reluctant to implement *Gladue* principled-sentencing despite the explicit direction of the Supreme Court of Canada.²⁴ Similarly, policing practices in Saskatchewan further discriminate against Indigenous peoples, with carding and street checks disproportionately targeting Indigenous people in the province.²⁵ Respondents were emphatic that while the province still requires a great deal of education in regards to the Indigenous experience in Saskatchewan, positive reconciliation efforts simply cannot progress while such injustices continue in our province.

IMMEDIATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Abolition of street checks and carding in Saskatchewan. Ensure a robust program of in-depth cultural education for police officers in the province.
2. The Correctional Services Act should be amended to include a section on the cultural needs of Aboriginal offenders.
3. *Gladue* factors are inconsistently considered in Saskatchewan’s courts. Policy should ensure that *Gladue* analysis is systematically implemented in the province’s courts, with reports on progress mandatory.
4. Undertake reforms to better address the needs of offenders with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).
5. Provide sufficient and stable funding for restorative justice and alternative sentencing programs in the province.
6. Re-establish a provincial employment strategy for Indigenous Peoples.

LONG-TERM POLICY GOALS

1. Government commitment to aggressively implement the recommendations in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Call to Action.
2. Dedicated provincial funding to publicly memorialize and remember the victims of colonialism through commemoration projects on the theme of reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

The Saskatchewan public provided us with a broad, diverse and informed opinion on what they imagine transformational change could be in Saskatchewan. While we received a wide array of ideas, and suggestions, at least three general themes emerged throughout the submission process and the policy summit discussions. The first is that we need to view upstream spending that address the causes of social problems as a positive and cost-effective investment that will save us money in the long run. Conversely, while cuts to social spending may improve balance sheets short-term, they can create long-lasting impacts that outweigh any temporary cost-saving. There was widespread consensus that social program cuts — even in spite of the current deficit — were ill-advised and counter-productive. The second is that the resource commodity boom disguised the fact that the government does not currently have adequate revenue tools to cover its costs. Saskatchewan's revenues as a share of GDP have declined from 22.4 percent in 2007 to 17 percent in 2015.²⁶ Respondents were unified in their call for the government to consider new revenue sources, with a strong preference for increased progressivity in the provincial income tax system. Lastly, there was a real appetite for a grand vision for the province, particularly in regards to energy and the environment. Many respondents believe that Saskatchewan — with its ample renewable resources and provincial crown corporations — is uniquely situated to take advantage of the nascent green energy economy given the appropriate direction and investment by the provincial government. Despite the province's current economic woes, there was a tremendous optimism in the ability of the province to become a more just and sustainable place in the future. We want to thank the people of Saskatchewan for sharing their visions for the province with SaskForward. We certainly hope the government and the rest of the Saskatchewan public will seriously consider the thoughtful and inspiring ideas collected here.

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