



Speech from the Throne 2011

Delivered on the Occasion of the Opening of

The First Session of
the Twenty Seventh Legislature
Province of Saskatchewan

Monday, December 5, 2011

The Honourable Dr. Gordon L. Barnhart
Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan

MOVING SASKATCHEWAN FORWARD

MR. SPEAKER, MEMBERS OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY,
HONOURED GUESTS,
PEOPLE OF SASKATCHEWAN:

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the First Session of the Twenty-Seventh Legislature.

THANK YOU

My government has asked that I begin today with the following message to the people of Saskatchewan:

Thank you.

Thank you for renewing your trust in my government.

It will work every day to be worthy of that trust.

VISION

A few short weeks ago, my government presented the people of Saskatchewan with a clear, concise and forward-looking vision for our province.

Voters responded by providing the government with its second mandate.

My government is humbled by the confidence Saskatchewan people have shown them, and vows to approach the coming four years with an attitude of humility and service.

My government vows to keep Saskatchewan moving forward, to keep its commitments and to work to achieve the vision outlined in the recent election campaign.

That vision includes:

- a province of over 1.1 million people by 2015;
- a province that is steadily eliminating its General Revenue Fund debt;
- a place where young people get the best education and opportunities;
- a place where seniors are treated with dignity and respect; and
- a place where people with disabilities get the best care and support available in Canada.

To quote briefly from my government's vision for Saskatchewan:

“Simply put, our vision is that Saskatchewan will be the best place in Canada—to live, to work, to start a business, to get an education, to raise a family and to build a life.”

To that end, my government will take steps in this session to turn this vision into action:

- Action to sustain growth and opportunity in our province;
- Action to make life more affordable for Saskatchewan people;
- Action to maintain a competitive tax and royalty regime in Saskatchewan;
- Action to improve our quality of life; and
- Action to ensure government remains responsible, responsive, trustworthy and accountable to the people of our province.

GROWTH

According to the most recent Conference Board of Canada report:

“Saskatchewan’s economy is being fuelled by the continued development of the potash industry, and steady expansion in oil and gas extraction. Real gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to rise by a brisk 5.1 per cent in 2011, and Saskatchewan will have the fastest growing provincial economy”.

*Conference Board of Canada
November 25, 2011*

Through a continuing commitment to its **Saskatchewan Advantage Growth Plan**, my government will foster population growth and nation-leading economic performance.

Key to this plan are continued debt reduction, balanced budgets, competitive taxes and the promotion of global trade.

My government also will pursue stable natural resource royalties designed to encourage further investment.

Also key to growth is continued investment in highways and transportation infrastructure.

In its first term, my government spent \$2.2 billion on improving highways; the largest investment of its kind in Saskatchewan history.

Over 6,000 kilometres of highways have been improved.

That commitment will be matched with a further \$2.2 billion investment in the next four years.

Improving digital and electronic infrastructure is essential to the new economy.

Dropped cellphone calls are still a problem, despite an increased investment in SaskTel’s 4G network of \$170 million in my government’s first term.

In the current budget year, an additional \$100 million will be allocated to keep up with growth in demand for connectivity.

My government will also allocate an additional \$75 million over the next three years for the next generation of wireless technologies.

The Minister responsible has been instructed to make this SaskTel's number one priority.

In the last three years, my government invested \$273 million on innovation.

These investments are the catalyst that will fuel economic growth well into the future.

Farm and ranch families are the backbone of our province.

My government is proud to have introduced the three largest agricultural budgets in Saskatchewan history.

When it comes to managing risk and recovering from disasters, farm families can continue to rely on my government for help, now and in the future.

Sustained economic growth in Saskatchewan also depends on full participation by First Nations and Métis.

This is why my government was honoured to sign an historic agreement in May, establishing a joint task force on improving education and employment outcomes.

Through this task force, my government is committed to leading more First Nations and Métis young people to active participation in the work force.

Since 2007, my government has introduced legislation to create a fairer labour environment, balancing the interests of workers and employers.

My government will continue to ensure that the principles at the foundation of Saskatchewan's labour environment are fairness, competitive salaries and benefits, economic growth and accountability by all stakeholders.

While no new labour legislation will be introduced in this session, my government will continue to listen to the views of all stakeholders—unions, employees, employers and the public—as we work to achieve these objectives.

AFFORDABILITY

During the most recent Saskatchewan election, issues of affordability rightly came forward.

Many ideas, some conflicting, were discussed and evaluated.

This will be a government that continues to listen, continues to learn and continues to respond with action.

My government will consider ideas from all sources, including Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

As Saskatchewan continues to grow, affordable housing has become a major issue.

These pressures can be eased through partnerships involving governments, municipalities, builders and community-based organizations.

My government will introduce legislation to extend notice periods for rent increases from six months to one year.

This will apply to property owners who choose not to participate in the newly created tenant assistance initiative established by the Saskatchewan Rental Housing Industry Association.

My government continues to make progress through the **Saskatchewan Advantage Housing Plan**.

The plan is on track to meet our target of 4,600 new, entry-level housing units to be created over five years.

My government will build on the Saskatchewan Advantage Housing Plan by exploring additional new-growth tax incentives to encourage construction of new, affordable rental housing.

Starting January 1, 2012, improvements to the **Secondary Suite Program** will be implemented.

These changes are designed to encourage greater participation in this program and increase the supply of affordable housing.

A total of \$2 million will be available for the development of approximately 70 to 100 secondary suites.

My government also will introduce the **Saskatchewan First-Time Homebuyers Tax Credit**.

Effective January 1, 2012, this new incentive will provide a \$10,000 non-refundable income tax credit to all first-time homebuyers – creating savings of \$1,100.

This tax credit also will be available to people with disabilities looking to purchase a home that is more accessible.

This **First-Time Homebuyers Tax Credit** is the next step in addressing housing affordability.

It is a responsible and affordable incentive for those moving from renting to buying a home, resulting in more homeowners in Saskatchewan and freeing up more rental spaces for others.

My government believes the best way to make life more affordable for Saskatchewan families is by ensuring they keep more of what they earn.

Over the past four years, substantial tax relief has been provided to everyone: homeowners, small business owners, farmers, individuals and families.

Moving forward, my government will continue to keep taxes low, thereby maintaining our competitive advantage over other jurisdictions.

The first promise kept by my government in the days after this fall's general election was a tax reduction to make life more affordable for families.

Effective November 15, the Provincial Sales Tax exemption on children's clothing was extended to children under 18, up from age 14.

To further help families with the cost of children's activities, my government will extend the **Active Families Benefit** to all children under 18.

After decades of Saskatchewan being a net exporter of our young people, more and more young people are choosing to stay in the province.

Four years ago, my government set out to establish the most aggressive youth recruitment and retention program in Canada.

The **Graduate Retention Program** returns up to \$20,000 in tuition for post-secondary graduates who stay and work in Saskatchewan.

This program has been hugely successful – to date nearly 50,000 Graduate Retention Program certificates have been delivered, paying out over \$53 million.

The Graduate Retention Program will remain in place for years to come.

Record investments of over \$2.8 billion have been dedicated to Saskatchewan's post-secondary system over the past four years.

My government also recognizes that students and their families need some direct assistance to help with the costs of higher education.

To that end, my government will introduce the **Saskatchewan Advantage Scholarship** during this session.

Starting next year, every new Saskatchewan high school graduate will be eligible for a \$2,000 credit toward post-secondary tuition - \$500 per year for up to four years.

Additionally, the new **Saskatchewan Advantage Grant for Education Savings** will make it easier for parents to save for their children's education.

This new program will see the province match 10 per cent of contributions to a child's Registered Education Savings Plan (RESP) account – to a maximum of \$250 each year.

This contribution will be in addition to the 20 per cent grant now provided by the federal government.

These two measures put into action my government's vision for a well-educated workforce.

Saskatchewan is now the best place in Canada to save for our children's education, the best place to receive an education and the best place to live and work after completing an education.

Today in Saskatchewan, one in seven people is over the age of 65.

For far too long, our long-term care facilities for seniors were in poor shape.

Today, my government renews its commitment to build 13 new long-term care facilities under a new funding formula.

That formula will see 80 per cent of the cost of these new facilities covered by the provincial government, reducing the burden on communities.

My government has helped low-income seniors by making significant improvements to the **Seniors Income Plan** during the past four years, more than doubling the maximum benefits available through the program.

These changes have also doubled the number of seniors who are eligible for benefits.

More seniors are also receiving additional health coverage through the program.

My government will take the next step to provide even further assistance to seniors by increasing Seniors Income Plan benefits by over 40 per cent over the next four years.

By 2015, Seniors Income Plan benefits will have been tripled compared to 2007.

My government recognizes that many low-income seniors don't receive any income beyond federal and provincial benefits.

Therefore, my government will introduce a new **Seniors Personal Care Home Benefit**.

This benefit will subsidize the difference between a senior's monthly income and the cost of their personal care home space – up to a threshold of \$1,800 in 2012, increasing to \$2,000 by 2015.

That's an annual benefit of over \$3,000 in 2012, increasing to over \$4,000 by 2015.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Saskatchewan people enjoy a sense of community and quality of life that is simply unrivalled anywhere in Canada.

Our natural resources, our pristine environment, our people and our communities make Saskatchewan the best place in Canada to work, to live and to raise a family.

But there is always more work to be done and my government will take action to continue improving Saskatchewan's quality of life.

It's a commitment that begins with our children.

The past four years have seen record investments in K-12 education—both in capital and operations.

More than 3,400 child care spaces and 115 new pre-kindergarten programs have been added.

In the next four years, an additional 2,000 child care spaces will be created.

An important part of my government's vision is that if one has a disability, Saskatchewan should still be the best place to live.

It should be a place where one can find the best services, the best supports, the most dignity and the most opportunities.

Work toward this goal began in 2009, with the establishment of the **Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability** program.

Today, this program helps about 3,000 Saskatchewan people living in residential care.

During this session, my government will introduce significant expansions to this program.

Direct benefits will be provided to up to 7,000 additional individuals living outside of the residential care system.

Further, benefits will increase over the next four years by \$100 per month for those in residential care, \$350 per month for a single person living outside of residential care and \$400 per month for a couple.

My government reaffirms its commitment to the Saskatchewan Children and Youth Agenda introduced in the last budget.

This well-received initiative takes a cross-ministry approach in addressing common problems facing children and families at risk.

Enhanced services are one component of the Children and Youth Agenda.

My government will be providing an additional \$4 million to improve services for individuals and families living with autism.

We often think of Autism Spectrum Disorder as something that affects children only.

It is important to remember that autism isn't something one will outgrow.

In addition to the work being done to enhance supports for children and their families, my government will work with community-based organizations to develop and implement better programs and services for adults with autism.

Services such as job training and life skills development will ensure these adults can make meaningful contributions to a growing Saskatchewan.

My government's vision includes access to timely health care and that means significantly reducing surgical wait times.

The **Saskatchewan Surgical Initiative** has been turning this vision into reality.

There are roughly 19 per cent fewer patients waiting for surgery than one year ago.

A total of 99 per cent of surgeries are completed within 18 months, 96 per cent within 12 months and 87 per cent are completed within 6 months.

My government will continue devoting attention and resources toward its stated goal that by 2014, no patient will have to wait longer than three months for surgery.

As of today, we are three-quarters of the way to achieving that goal, as 76 per cent of surgeries are now completed within three months.

Improvements to rural health care will also be at the vanguard of my government's renewed agenda.

Soon, up to \$120,000 in student loans for new physicians and up to \$20,000 in student loans for new nurses and nurse practitioners will be forgiven for those agreeing to practice for five years in rural and remote communities.

A new 20-doctor rural locum pool will be established to provide relief for existing rural doctors.

A total of 20 new nurse practitioner training seats will be added over the next four years - a 67 per cent increase from the 30 training seats that exist today.

The commitment to bring the **Shock Trauma Air Rescue Society** emergency medical helicopter service to Saskatchewan will soon be a reality.

This service will provide added emergency coverage and complement existing road ambulance services in our province.

My government will fulfill two commitments to improve the quality of life for people with diabetes.

Long-acting insulin will be moved from Exceptional Drug Status to the full formulary.

The **Children's Insulin Pump Program** will be extended to people 25 years old and under, from the current cut-off of 17 years of age.

My government's vision includes safer communities.

Over the past four years, my government has turned this vision into action by hiring 120 more police officers as promised.

It has also funded the **Western Canadian Gang Database** and created a **Northern Drug and Gang Unit**.

Further meaningful steps will be taken to address the root causes of crime.

My government will provide additional funding to the highly successful **Prince Albert Community Mobilization Partnership**, a first of its kind in all of Canada.

This program places an emphasis on early intervention and prevention.

My government will increase monitoring of individuals at high-risk to re-offend.

Ten additional officers will be hired for this task.

Additional prosecutors and support staff also will be hired.

Saskatchewan's provincial parks play a major role in conservation, in tourism and in providing economic benefits to nearby communities.

Since 2007, park visits have increased by 10 per cent.

Over \$33 million have been invested in capital projects in our provincial parks over the past four years.

This trend will continue with an investment of a further \$10 million in maintenance and upgrades to Saskatchewan parks.

As more young families stay in Saskatchewan, there has been a resurgence in local minor sports programs.

In many Saskatchewan communities, the local rink is the hub of activity in the winter months and a key to the community's quality of life.

To assist municipalities with the costs of operating local rinks, my government will provide a new **Community Rinks Affordability Grant**.

It will provide \$2,500 a year to help with the cost of operating roughly 750 municipally owned indoor ice surfaces in Saskatchewan.

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Many families have expressed concerns with the school year starting before the Labour Day long week-end in September.

Further, a desire was expressed to achieve some measure of consistency in the school start date across the province.

To address these concerns, my government will introduce legislation to standardize the start of the school year so that instruction will begin after the Labour Day long weekend across the province.

Teachers and school board trustees will be fully consulted on the effective implementation of these changes.

Current class time will be preserved just as it has been in school divisions that already have made this choice.

During this session, my government will introduce legislation to:

- strengthen the enforcement of maintenance orders;
- increase penalties for those who fail to pay fines;
- strengthen the ability of corrections officers to crack down on drug-related, gang-related and other illegal activity within our correctional institutions;

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- more clearly define the powers and responsibilities of the Children’s Advocate;
 - introduce degree granting legislation providing more opportunities for our students while protecting the tradition of excellence associated with Saskatchewan degrees;
 - streamline the business registration process across the three western provinces under the New West Partnership Trade Agreement; and
 - ensure that any future provincial election campaigns do not overlap with a federal election campaign.

SASKATCHEWAN’S VISION FOR THE WORLD

A few weeks ago, the United Nations announced that the world’s population had reached seven billion people.

A short 12 to 14 years from now, there will be eight billion people on this planet.

Most of this population growth will occur in the world’s poorest countries.

Many of the world’s top analysts say we will require a second “green revolution” in order to keep per capita food production at current levels.

To build on our natural advantages and to help feed the world, my government has offered its financial support for plans by the University of Saskatchewan to launch a **Global Institute for Food Security**.

My government believes our province is ideally positioned to play a significant role in solving problems of global hunger.

In a world longing for both food and energy security, my government believes Saskatchewan can provide the answers.

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

Four weeks ago, my government received a renewed mandate to keep Saskatchewan moving forward.

Today, governments all over the world are facing the dire consequences of overspending, deficits and debt.

So it is not surprising that the people of our great province, in their collective wisdom, provided my government a mandate that included a strong word of caution:

Live within your means.

Today, Saskatchewan has a tremendous advantage.

Balanced budgets. Less debt. Declining interest payments. A growing economy.

Saskatchewan people have told my government – make sure you keep our advantage.

My government has heard this message.

It will keep the budget balanced.

It will keep the economy strong.

It will live within its means; and

It will keep Saskatchewan moving forward.

Today, Saskatchewan is dealing with many new challenges—the challenges of growth.

In the coming months, my government will pursue new ways to ensure MLAs are seeking input from people throughout Saskatchewan regarding these challenges.

ANNIVERSARIES IN 2012

In 2012, we will celebrate Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee, as well as hold celebrations marking the 100th anniversary of the opening of this building.

These events speak to the importance of our constitutional monarchy and our rich history.

CONCLUSION

Four weeks ago today, a very diverse group of 58 women and men from all parts of the province and all walks of life were given a lease on a seat in this Chamber.

I ask that you remember every day that your seat in this place — hard-fought and well-earned as it might be - is on loan.

It was purchased with the blood of our soldiers and the toil of our settlers.

It is sustained with the efforts of women and men all over our great province.

It is willed to you, in trust, by future generations.

If you keep this in mind during all your deliberations, I know you will be worthy of the great responsibility you have been given.

During this session, the Estimates for the New Year commencing April 1, 2012, will be submitted to you.

The Public Accounts for the current year will be tabled.

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 guide this Assembly in all of its deliberations and to bless our province – the best province in the best country in the world.

God Bless Saskatchewan.

God Bless Canada.

And God Save the Queen.

