

KEEPING THE SASKATCHEWAN ADVANTAGE

Mr. Speaker, colleagues and visitors, I am honoured once again to rise today to deliver my second budget, our government's fifth budget, and the first of our second term.

It is a pleasure to have them here today because SASKATCHEWAN, has a great story to tell.

Mr. Speaker, this year we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of this Legislative Building.

A couple of weeks ago, I noted the 100th anniversary of the first provincial budget read in this Legislature.

That budget was presented at a time of tremendous growth in our province.

In 1912, Saskatchewan's population surpassed half a million people for the first time,...

And Premier Walter Scott's government introduced a budget of \$9 million dollars ,...or about \$18 dollars of government spending for each of those 500,000 Saskatchewan residents.

Of course, both the province and the government have grown a bit more since then.

The 2012 budget also comes at a time of tremendous growth in our province.

Just this morning, we learned that Saskatchewan's population is now 1,067,612 – up 17,064 in the past year.

The 2012 budget will spend \$11.2 billion dollars- \$10,486 dollars for each one of those 1,067,612 people. That is quite a difference from 100 years ago.

Of course, today's Government provides many more services to its citizens than it did in 1912, when most of the money was spent on highways, telephones and public buildings – not health and education.

Our government has a responsibility to provide these important services.

But we also have a responsibility to live within our means,...to ensure our programs are sustainable in the long term, ...and to balance the budget.

Saskatchewan people understand this. Across the world, we see the chaos caused by debt crises and failing economies, as some governments failed to live up to their responsibilities.

Last fall, we had an election that presented two very different visions about government spending.

One vision said - our economy is doing well in Saskatchewan, so now is the time to spend.

The other vision said - our economy is doing well in Saskatchewan.

To make sure it continues we need to control spending,... balance the budget,... and keep Saskatchewan moving forward.

Saskatchewan people made it pretty clear which path they chose to follow.

So Mr. Speaker, let me begin by delivering a message that no other provincial Finance Minister in Canada has been able to deliver this year.

This budget is a balanced budget.

It is balanced in the General Revenue Fund.

It is balanced in the Summary Financial Statements.

At a time when so many others continue to struggle with a sluggish economy, huge deficits and growing debt,...

Saskatchewan is now a "have" province, our economy is leading the nation, our debt is lower,... and our provincial finances are sound.

That's the Saskatchewan Advantage.

The 2012-13 Budget is about Keeping the Saskatchewan Advantage.

A New Era in Saskatchewan

Today, we are living in a unique time in Saskatchewan's history. I have lived in this province my entire life, and I have never witnessed the kind of growth that we see today.

Our population is growing.

Our economy is growing.

Our communities are growing.

We had a strong economic performance last year, in spite of the challenges created by flooding.

Crop production in 2011 was up by almost 15 per cent over 2010.

Potash production and sales were up.

Value of oil sales was up.

Retail trade was up.

Our international exports grew by 25 per cent in 2011.

The total value of building permits grew by 25 per cent in 2011.

In 2011, the Saskatchewan economy grew by 3.6 per cent – second highest in Canada, even with the challenges caused by excess moisture and flooding.

The private forecasters expect us to lead the nation with 3.1 per cent growth this year and to lead again with 3.3 per cent growth in 2013.

Saskatchewan has the lowest unemployment rate in the country.

Our debt to GDP ratio is the second lowest in the country.

With fundamentals like that, it's no wonder Saskatchewan people are feeling optimistic.

A recent survey conducted by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business shows that 70 per cent of Saskatchewan small business operators are optimistic about the future, second only to Alberta amongst the provinces.

But, Mr. Speaker, I know some will ask,...

Why does government need to restrain spending if the economy is so strong?

The answer – because that's what will KEEP the Saskatchewan economy strong.

That's what will KEEP the Saskatchewan Advantage.

Saskatchewan continues to be a leader in its management of public finance.

We will have a balanced budget this year – in fact a surplus in the General Revenue Fund of \$95 million dollars.

We will have a surplus in the Summary Financial Statements of \$14.8 million dollars.

And we will show a healthy balance of \$756.4 million dollars in the Growth and Financial Security Fund – so we can be ready for any unanticipated events.

Balanced budgets – sustainable spending – sound provincial finances,... that's KEEPING the Saskatchewan Advantage.

Maintaining Our Infrastructure

A growing economy and a growing province creates challenges for Saskatchewan and our government.

But, as the Premier has said, we would rather face the challenges of growth than the challenges of decline.

One of the challenges of growth is maintaining and improving infrastructure.

Since we took office in 2007, a great deal of progress has been made.

A total of \$4.1 billion dollars has been spent on infrastructure.

And, we will continue to make key investments needed to accommodate growth for Saskatchewan residents and Saskatchewan businesses.

This budget delivers \$788 million dollars for capital investments.

Funds will be allocated to schools, health care facilities, highways and municipal infrastructure.

In our first term, our government delivered a long-awaited municipal revenue sharing system that tied growth in funding to growth in our economy.

This new formula coupled with our strong and growing economy has delivered more funding to Saskatchewan communities than even the most optimistic could have anticipated.

In 2011-12, municipalities received \$217 million dollars from the Saskatchewan Party government's revenue sharing program, a 29.5 per cent increase from the previous year.

This year, revenue sharing will provide \$237.4 million dollars, a 9.5 per cent increase from 11-12.

This is an increase of \$110 million dollars since 2007-08.

All of our major cities have seen revenue sharing more than double since 2007.

And it will grow even more as the economy expands in the years ahead.

Total funding to support municipalities from across government now amounts to \$349 million dollars, or 60 per cent more than in 2007-08.

This year, we will keep our election promise to help communities make their local rinks more affordable by providing a \$2500 grant to offset operating costs.

Working with Saskatchewan communities is an important part of Keeping the Saskatchewan Advantage.

Mr. Speaker, over half of the total spending in the 1912 budget - \$5 million dollars – was dedicated to creating a new provincial highway system.

Today, we continue to place great importance on our highway infrastructure and that is why over the past four years, we have spent \$2.2 billion dollars in this area.

That's 64 per cent more than the amount spent by the previous administration in its final 4 years in office.

In the past four years, 770 km of major rural highways were rebuilt and another 1485 km of roads were repaved. . .

The twinning of Highway 11 between Saskatoon and Prince Albert was accelerated and \$150 million was invested in the Urban Connector Program to improve the connections to the provincial highway system.

Overall, more than 6000 kilometres of roadways were improved in the last 4 years.

This year approximately \$581.5 million dollars has been allocated for the highways system throughout Saskatchewan.

We will keep our election promise to spend another \$2.2 billion dollars on our provincial highway system, over the next 4 years.

We will make a \$63 million dollar investment in Gateway Corridors which will provide for continuing work on the Regina West Bypass.

We will finish the twinning of Highway 11 to Prince Albert . . . ,

We will finish the Yorkton truck route . . .

And we will begin construction of the Estevan bypass.

This budget also provides \$3 million dollars to begin a new Passing Lane Initiative. This money will be used to begin design and aggregate work on a section of highway between Balgonie and Fort Qu'Appelle.

This year we will spend \$207.8 million for transportation preservation and rehabilitation projects.

\$18 million will go towards fixing roads flooded in 2011.

There is \$59 million for the Bridge and Culvert Strategy, including \$20.7 million to continue work on the St. Louis Bridge.

This budget also provides \$1.4 million dollars to continue with safety reviews of our major dams.

Maintaining and expanding our infrastructure is a key part of Keeping the Saskatchewan Advantage.

Mr. Speaker, just as creating a new highway system was vital to the growth of our province in 1912,...

Investing in innovation is vital to the growth of our province today.

In this budget, we will invest \$99 million dollars in research and development to help drive our economy forward.

\$20 million dollars for research and technology grants in Agriculture.

\$19 million dollars for the Saskatchewan Research Council, which includes a five per cent increase to help one of Canada's most effective research organizations extend its reach.

In recent years, the SRC has become very adept at attracting private contracts in its operations.

In 2010-11, the economic impact of its activities was \$527 million dollars.

The SRC is becoming increasingly well known internationally, and has become a magnet for companies from around the world needing its research skills.

In the past year alone, it has worked with a diverse group of companies, from an African potash mining company to a Canadian vaccine company now exporting its products to Brazil.

We are refocusing the Research and Development Tax Credit to ensure it remains sustainable in the future.

Canadian controlled private corporations will continue to receive a 15 per cent refundable tax credit subject to an annual limit of \$3 million dollars in qualifying R and D spending.

Other qualifying expenditures will be eligible for a 15 per cent non-refundable tax credit.

We also aim to develop more valued-added opportunities for our natural resources through Innovation Saskatchewan.

\$7 million dollars will be spent to enhance research, including \$3.3 million dollars for nuclear research and development

At the same time, we are doubling our grant to the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Water Security at the University of Saskatchewan to \$1 million dollars.

We will spend another million dollars on the second year of the Boreal Water Strategy, aimed at collecting a base of environmental information on our northern lakes to provide information for development decisions.

\$250,000 dollars will begin the process of establishing an Institute for Food Security at the University of Saskatchewan and \$4.1 million dollars will go towards the operation of the Canadian Light Source.

As well, we will provide \$2.1 million dollars to help fund the operations of InterVac, the research centre devoted to improvements in vaccines.

The advancements Saskatchewan is making in research and development are very exciting.

You know Mr. Speaker, I was reading about some traditions of budget day in the British House of Commons.

I have recently learned the budget speech can be up to four hours long.....four hours Mr. Speaker.

Also the Chancellor of the Exchequer.....that is their finance minister.....was allowed to drink anything he wants while he delivered the speech.....including alcohol.

Mr. Speaker, I can assure you that this (hold your glass up) is water.....and that this speech is not four hours long.

However if it were, you might need to start serving our guests alcohol.

Improving Agriculture

Our government has always supported Saskatchewan farmers and we will continue to do so.

We were there for farmers last year when they were affected by the second consecutive year of serious flooding.

\$94 million dollars was put into the Excess Moisture Program to help them deal with flooded land and unseeded acreage.

We have worked closely with the federal government to improve crop insurance this year to provide better coverage for excess moisture and flooding.

Overall, this budget provides \$321.4 million dollars to fully fund crop insurance, along with AgriStability and AgriInvest.

This increase includes record funding for crop insurance.

Coverage levels will increase to a record high average of \$174 dollars per acre.

This is almost double the coverage level offered to producers under the previous government in 2007,...

And producers now have the option of purchasing up to \$100 dollars per acre of coverage for any unseeded acres in the event of more flooding.

The Saskatchewan Trade and Export Partnership, or STEP has played a key role in promoting Saskatchewan exports throughout the world and opening up new markets for our agricultural products.

This budget increases funding to STEP by half a million dollars.

The Ministry of Agriculture is also providing an additional \$1 million for international trade and market development in this budget.

Making Life More Affordable

Mr. Speaker, another one of the challenges of growth is affordability.

For homeowners

We know that our rapid growth is creating challenges for people in finding affordable housing.

That's why we have moved to encourage construction of more affordable housing.

Last year at this time, our government announced a five point housing plan, making it easier for Saskatchewan people with modest incomes to purchase new homes.

Our goal is to add at least 4,600 new housing units over the next five years.

So far, we have experienced significant progress.

For example, the Headstart On a Home program has proven to be very successful.

The Immigrant Investor Program which loans money to builders has sparked the construction of five new condominium projects across the province in the last year. This will provide homes to low and moderate income families.

The most recent project is a 21 unit condominium announced for North Battleford.

New buildings are also underway in Saskatoon, Prince Albert, Moose Jaw and Yorkton.

The Affordable Home Ownership Program provides municipalities with a maximum \$5000 per unit matching grant for the purchase of a new principal residence.

We estimated 40 units would be purchased under this program, to date we have received 164 qualifying applications.

Under the Rental Construction Incentive we introduced last year, we estimated developers would build 300 new rental housing units.

In its first year, we have received applications for more than 1000 new units.

This budget provides a \$2 million dollar increase for these two programs, for a total investment this year of \$3.7 million dollars.

We believe this is a good start but there is more to do.

We know that part of what is holding back new rental construction in the province is high tax rates on investment income...

As a result, we are introducing a Corporate Income Tax rebate to qualifying companies to build new rental accommodations.

This rebate will equal 10 per cent of the amount of the taxable rental income earned from new rental housing projects over a 10 year eligibility period.

We expect this program to build on the success of the Rental Construction Incentive and are anticipating an additional 1,000 rental units will be under construction by the end of next year.

When combined with existing housing incentives, we expect that an additional 10,000 new rental units will be built over the life of the programs.

We promised the First Time Homebuyers Tax Credit in last fall's election campaign.

Beginning this year, a provincial income tax credit of up to \$1,100 dollars will be provided to individuals and families purchasing their first home.

Mr. Speaker, there is more to be done and our government understands that housing continues to be a challenge in a growing Saskatchewan.

But make no mistake – we are moving in the right direction.

In the past four years since our government took office, there were 23,632 housing starts.

That's an average of 5,908 per year.

In the previous 16 years, there was an average of only 2,932 housing starts per year.

Housing starts have more than doubled in the past four years and we expect that trend to continue.

For families

Of course, affordability extends beyond housing.

In the fall campaign, we also promised to extend the PST exemption on children's clothing to age 17 and under.

We made good on that promise immediately after the election. . . .

Saving families about \$3 million dollars per year.

The Active Families Tax Benefit was also expanded to include all children 17 and under beginning in 2012.

This benefit provides a refundable tax credit of up to \$150 dollars per child to help with the cost of positive activities such as the arts, music lessons and sports.

For students

Our government has a strong record of making life more affordable for Saskatchewan students.

Four years ago, we introduced the Graduate Retention Program – the most aggressive youth recruitment and retention program in all of Canada.

This program allows post-secondary graduates who choose to stay in Saskatchewan after graduation to get up to \$20,000 dollars of their tuition costs back.

And it's working.

Since the program began in 2008, it has provided over \$46 million dollars in tuition rebates to more than 30,000 post-secondary graduates.

More importantly, we have stemmed the flow of young people out of our province.

More young people are choosing to stay,... choosing to begin a career, start a family, and build a life in Saskatchewan.

Keeping our young people here is a significant part of Keeping the Saskatchewan Advantage.

That's why last fall, we promised to take the next step by introducing a new Saskatchewan Advantage Scholarship to help EVERY new high school graduate with the cost of post-secondary education.

This budget provides \$4.6 million dollars to keep this promise by providing new high school graduates with up to \$2,000 over four years to be applied toward tuition fees at any Saskatchewan post-secondary institution.

Effective January 2013, we are also introducing the Saskatchewan Advantage Grant for Education Savings.

This will match up to 10 per cent of the annual contribution to a child's Registered Education Savings Plan account, up to \$250 dollars per year per child.

That's on top of the 20 per cent matching grant already provided by the federal government.

This budget adds almost \$6.7 million dollars for a total of \$36.5 million dollars for the Student Aid fund.

There is also a special assistance program for medical students, who face some of the highest tuition expenses in university.

This budget keeps our promise to establish a program to forgive up to \$120,000 dollars in student loans for new doctors, and up to \$20,000 dollars for nurses and Nurse Practitioners who choose to practice in qualifying rural and remote communities.

It also adds 5 Nurse Practitioner training seats to begin meeting the campaign commitment to add 20 new Nurse Practitioner seats.

Overall, this budget provides a \$12 million increase, or 2 per cent more, to support operating costs at our post-secondary institutions.

This should allow them to hold tuition increases to approximately four per cent for key direct entry programs.

Sustainability

Mr. Speaker, our government has a responsibility to ensure that these and other important programs and services for Saskatchewan people are affordable and sustainable.

Some governments have allowed well-intentioned but unsustainable programs to put them into deficit.

In his sweeping report on the state of Ontario's finances,...

Economist Don Drummond said the time to act is now – before today's challenges become tomorrow's crisis.

While Saskatchewan's finances are in far better shape than Ontario's, Mr. Drummond's advice is sound.

The time to ensure your spending is sustainable is BEFORE it becomes a crisis.

Today, I am announcing some changes in government spending to ensure our programs for people remain affordable and sustainable.

We are raising the cap on prescription drug fees from \$15 dollars to \$20 dollars under the Seniors' and Children's Drug Plan.

This cap has not changed since it was created in 2007.

But even with these changes, the plan remains one of the best in Canada in terms of lowering the price of prescription drugs for seniors.

At the same time, our government will continue to improve income benefits to low-income seniors.

In our first term, we DOUBLED benefits provided to low-income seniors under the Seniors Income Plan,...

And we DOUBLED the number of seniors who qualified for this benefit.

There had been no increase in this benefit in the previous 16 years.

This year, we will deliver on our promise to increase this benefit by another \$50 dollars a month – or \$600 dollars per year.

Over the next four years, this benefit will be increased by nearly \$1,000 dollars per year – TRIPLE what it was when our government took office.

We also promised to assist seniors by introducing a new Senior Personal Care Home Benefit, currently estimated at \$278 dollars per month. It will rise to \$369 dollars per month by the fourth year.

In order to achieve savings, we looked at the effectiveness and efficiency of certain tax credit and economic programs.

As a result, our government will be ending the Film Employment Tax Credit.

There have been many high quality film and television productions as a result of the \$100 million invested through this tax credit.

However, the overall decline in industry activity combined with the need to increase our commitment in order to compete with other jurisdictions has resulted in this decision.

Productions which have already registered for the credit will continue to receive the credit;

However, new productions will no longer qualify.

This measure will save Saskatchewan taxpayers up to \$3 million dollars this year, and approximately \$8 million a year when it is fully wound down.

We believe regional economic priorities should be set locally, not provincially.

With this in mind, our government will cease funding Enterprise Regions.

With the significant increases in municipal revenue sharing, we feel this is a role that municipal governments should lead, if they so choose.

This change will save Saskatchewan taxpayers approximately \$4 million dollars a year.

The provincial government will remain focused on creating a strong economic climate through lower taxes, infrastructure enhancement and labour force development.

Our government continues to look for ways to reduce our own overall size and cost.

We are currently in the third year of a four-year plan to reduce the size of the civil service by 15 per cent.

We are on track to meet our target and showing that it is possible to have a smaller, more efficient government. So far, this effort has saved Saskatchewan \$129 million.

We will continue to work with third party stakeholders to find additional savings through efficiencies that don't negatively impact front line services.

Third parties such as Regional Health Authorities, post-secondary institutions and school divisions are all being asked to look for savings within their operations.

Mr. Speaker – we are making these decisions and taking these actions now in order to ensure affordable, sustainable programs for people in the future.

Balanced budgets and sustainable spending – now and in the future.

It's a key part of Keeping the Saskatchewan Advantage.

Improved Quality of Life.

Mr. Speaker, these measures will allow us to continue taking steps to improve life for people in Saskatchewan.

For persons with disabilities

Our government is strongly committed to improving the quality and dignity of life for persons with disabilities.

That's why we promised expanded coverage and additional benefits under the Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability program.

This was the single largest promise we made in the election campaign, and today we are keeping this promise.

We are adding almost \$18 million dollars to the Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability program, to provide greater benefits to a larger number of persons with disabilities.

With this move, the number of people eligible for this program will more than triple to as many as 10,000 adults.

The available benefits will go up by \$200 dollars per month in July of 2012, and by \$350 dollars per month in the fourth year.

Our goal is to make Saskatchewan the best place in Canada for persons with disabilities and to make that part of the Saskatchewan Advantage."

For disadvantaged youth

At the same time, we recognize that not all children in Saskatchewan have the same advantages.

Last year, we launched a new Children and Youth Agenda to improve the prospects of some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

We have ambitious goals. We are trying to transform the child welfare system and eliminate gaps in educational and employment outcomes.

In last year's budget, we devoted an additional \$34 million dollars to programs across government aimed at improving outcomes for those challenged by poverty, poor education and difficult social issues.

Our new Child and Youth Agenda has greatly improved relationships with First Nations agencies.

This budget will provide an additional \$6 million dollars for the Child and Youth Agenda.

This includes an additional \$750,000 dollars for the annual cost of more child protection workers.

A new approach to conduct home assessments for First Nations children who can be placed in the homes of extended family members has been designed.

Contracts have been signed with several First Nations agencies and we have completed 72 home assessments in this fiscal year.

This budget will deliver another \$750,000 dollars to build on that progress.

In education, we have created 40 new Pre-Kindergarten programs in 23 communities. This budget adds another 15.

This budget also provides \$2 million dollars in operating funds and another \$4 million dollars in capital for 500 new child care spaces as we move toward keeping our promise of 2,000 new spaces over four years.

We also intend to build on our educational efforts for disadvantaged young people by providing \$500,000 dollars for the establishment of 20 Literacy Camps in the summer months.

In the past year, the Regina Community Clinic Life Skills and Addictions Program helped 45 adults with FASD.

Children in the FASD Family Support Program in the Saskatoon area have improved their school attendance and none have dropped out.

We know that FASD is an entirely preventable condition.

To continue this good work, an additional \$600,000 dollars for three storefront projects in our three largest cities has been allocated.

Our goal is to provide intensive prevention programming to pregnant women who could be at risk of having a child with FASD.

We have provided the necessary funding for the health regions to improve therapy and support workers for those with Autism.

This budget fulfills our campaign promise by providing another \$1 million dollars for Autism programming.

Innovative approaches to community involvement are also showing promising results in crime prevention.

An operation called Community Mobilization Prince Albert brings together officials from the police, government agencies and community partners to provide immediate and long term

interventions in the lives of at-risk individuals to help keep them on track.

We believe this initiative has played a role in some very encouraging trends in Prince Albert.

Between February and October of 2011, reported crime was down 15 per cent.

Emergency room visits were down 10 per cent.

The number of public prosecutions was down 12 per cent.

There was a 9 per cent reduction in calls to the police for help.

This budget will deliver on our campaign promise by providing another \$450,000 dollars to build on the success of this program.

We are also providing \$1.9 million for the first year of our campaign commitment to a High Risk Violent Crime Reduction strategy.

This initiative will get tough on violent crime and make Saskatchewan communities safer by adding new police officers and prosecution resources and by using GPS to track high-risk violent offenders.

\$3 million dollars has been allocated to facilitate expansions to the Prince Albert Correctional facility and \$9.6 million dollars will complete the expansion to the Pine Grove Correctional Centre.

For First Nations and Métis

Our government will continue to work to improve the lives of our First Nations and Métis citizens through a variety of programs.

This budget provides almost \$172 million dollars for First Nations and Métis funding which includes some of the programs I have already mentioned.

Additional dollars for First Nations and Métis economic and social programs through provincial gaming agreements will increase by 3.8 per cent to \$67 million dollars this year.

We have committed \$1.5 million dollars over 3 years to our Northern Action Plan to work with leaders to address issues that hinder social and economic progress in the North.

Another \$450,000 dollars will be spent on the First Nations Apprenticeship Program to help promote new careers.

Our efforts to increase the number of aboriginal people in the workforce are also showing progress.

There are 5,900 more First Nations and Métis people employed to the end of February this year over last year.

Over the past 4 years, the number of First Nations and Métis apprentices has increased by 24 per cent.

The number of First Nations and Métis Journeyperson Certifications has doubled from 61 in 2006-07 to 123 in 2010-11.

Education and training are essential to produce a better quality of life for all our citizens.

For K-12 students

High quality pre K-12 education is the foundation of our province's future success.

Our pre K-12 system provides one of the biggest challenges but also exciting opportunities for a growing province

Some of our schools are overcrowded.

Some of our communities are underserved.

This budget will provide almost \$38 million dollars to begin construction of six new school projects in Warman, Swift Current, Saskatoon, White City and Lloydminster.

We have allocated \$50 million dollars to continue building 15 different major school capital projects across the province.

This budget also provides \$4 million dollars to start planning for three school projects.

This will mean a new school for Hudson Bay.

It will also mean expansions and renovations for the existing high school in Martensville and renovations for the school in Leader.

This budget also introduces a new school division funding distribution model.

You will be hearing more about this from the Minister of Education. . . however, I will mention that the changes included in the new model will be phased in over a three year period.

\$10 million dollars has been added to allow a smooth transition for those divisions that will receive less under the new formula.

Overall funding for school operating will rise by 5.0 per cent. Operating funding will increase by \$59 million.

Access to Health care

Over the past four years, one of the key goals of our government has been improved access to health care.

We continue that job today by providing \$4.7 billion dollars to Saskatchewan Health – an increase of 4.9 per cent over last year.

There is an additional \$98 million dollars or 3.5 per cent increase to our Regional Health Authorities for health care staff, drugs, medical supplies and other operating costs.

We are also providing \$60.5 million for the Saskatchewan Surgical Initiative, one of the most important tools we have to improve access to patient care.

We have made significant progress on reducing wait times for surgery.

The number of people waiting longer than 18 months for surgery has dropped 81 per cent since we launched this initiative in April of 2010.

The number of people waiting more than 12 months has dropped significantly by 69 per cent.

99 per cent of all surgeries are now completed within 18 months of specialist referral, and 96 per cent within 12 months.

There is more to be done, but our government remains on track toward our goal of reducing surgical wait times to no more than three months by 2014.

The additional money this year will allow the health regions to continue with planning expansions to increase surgical capacity in our hospitals and operating rooms.

We have also had great success reducing the wait times for cancer patients.

The wait lists for treatment through the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency have dropped from almost 600 people waiting for treatment to less than 100.

This is a huge step which has positively impacted people in our province and we will continue to build on this success.

The budget provides an extra 13.8 per cent or \$16.9 million dollars more for the cancer agency.

This provides for more than 6,000 new patient referrals, almost 30,000 chemotherapy treatments and 39,000 mammograms.

This year, we will provide an extra \$4 million to expand the screening program for colorectal cancer province-wide. This will not only improve early detection, but will reduce the need for more expensive treatments when this type of cancer is found in later stages.

Providing long term care facilities where they are needed is also a key component of our health care strategy.

This year we will move to complete 6 long-term care facilities currently under construction in Radville, Redvers, Rosetown, Shellbrook, Tisdale and Watrous.

Construction of 7 additional care homes under a new funding model where the government becomes a shared owner with Regional Health Authorities will begin.

\$43 million dollars will be allocated to build facilities in Biggar, Kelvington, Kerrobert, Kipling, Maple Creek, Meadow Lake and Prince Albert.

As a result many seniors will receive the care they need near their homes and families, which is integral to Keeping the Saskatchewan Advantage.

Primary care is a huge concern to many and communities are working hard to improve that care.

This budget is devoting \$7 million dollars to develop new pilot projects in delivering primary care.

We will also begin the process of building a pool of 20 locums providing coverage for local doctors when they are away.

Emergency medical coverage is another key element of improving access.

\$5.5 million dollars has been allocated to launch the STARS emergency medical helicopter service across the province.

We will continue moving forward on a replacement for the Saskatchewan Hospital in North Battleford and have provided \$5 million dollars to continue planning for that facility.

We are also moving forward on the new hospital in Moose Jaw previously announced.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker, the Saskatchewan Advantage is real.

It has been built by the women and men who live in this province,...

Those whose families have lived here for generations,...

And those who have just recently arrived to start the next chapter of their lives in the new Saskatchewan.

This budget is about serving every one of those 1,067,612 people,...

Both by providing the important government services they need,...

But also by being good stewards of the tax dollars they provide,...

And making sure that every government service and program is affordable and sustainable in the long run.

The Saskatchewan Advantage is real.

While other provinces have massive deficits, we have balanced budgets.

While other provinces have high unemployment, we have thousands of job openings and the lowest unemployment in Canada.

While other provinces have sluggish economies, our economy is leading the nation.

We have come so far,...

From a “have-not” province to a “have” province.

From a declining population to a growing population.

From a stagnant economy to an economy that leads the nation.

But Mr. Speaker, the Saskatchewan Advantage is more than economic statistics and strong balance sheets.

Today, it is measured in the quiet confidence of our people,...

You can see it in their eyes and hear it in their voices.

They know that THIS Saskatchewan – this NEW Saskatchewan – is a great place to be,...

And that our best days are still ahead.

That’s KEEPING the Saskatchewan Advantage.

