

Keep Saskatchewan
Strong

Provincial Budget 2016-17

2016-17 BUDGET ADDRESS
“KEEP SASKATCHEWAN STRONG”

Honourable Kevin Doherty

Minister of Finance

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Check against delivery

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Speaker, colleagues, and visitors, I am honoured to rise today to present our government's 2016-17 Budget—my first as Minister of Finance.

There are many people I would like to thank.

....

Mr. Speaker, our government's vision continues to be for Saskatchewan to 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 accomplish that, we need to sustain growth and opportunities for Saskatchewan people.

We need to meet the challenges of growth.

We need to secure a better quality of life for all the people of this great province.

And we need to deliver responsive and responsible government.

This budget will keep Saskatchewan strong by keeping taxes low and by controlling operational spending....

And by continuing to make key investments in infrastructure and in government services for Saskatchewan people.

CHALLENGES AND CHANGE

True strength emerges in challenging times.

Today, we are faced with a fragile world economy, coupled with sharp declines in oil and potash prices.

This poses considerable challenges to our province's economy, its finances, its people.

But, the people of Saskatchewan are not daunted by challenges, of any type.

Together, we will meet these challenges.

This budget builds on the foundational strengths that we have developed over the past eight years:

- lowering taxes;
- investing in people;
- investing in infrastructure;
- and paying down debt—all to keep Saskatchewan strong.

We will continue to manage spending wisely.

And we will continue to keep taxes low.

More than 1.14 million children, women, and men—the most people in our province's history—now call Saskatchewan home.

Last year, more people were employed in this province than ever before.

And our unemployment rate remains one of the lowest in Canada.

But sustaining our province's economic strength and population growth will be a challenge in the shorter term.

Continuing low prices for oil and potash is putting pressure on revenue, on employment, and on our province's economy generally.

You can shrink from the type of challenges we are now facing in Saskatchewan.

Or you can turn them into opportunities.

Starting this year, we are commencing a government-wide process of transformational change.

Our goal is to ensure the sustainability of high-quality public services delivered in the most efficient, cost effective way possible.

To ensure those services remain viable in the long run, everything government does will be studied, every expense will be scrutinized.

Change is never easy.

Transformational change cannot be achieved overnight.

And it cannot be accomplished by government alone.

It will require making difficult decisions—beginning with this budget—but also in the years and budgets ahead.

It will require all of government's partners, including our public-sector employees and unions and our third party stakeholders, to work together as changes are made to meet the needs of Saskatchewan people.

And as part of transformation, important questions will be asked about every program, initiative, and expenditure.

Questions like, Is this program or service the role of government?

Is it something we should be doing?

If so, is it being delivered in the best possible manner, at the lowest possible cost to taxpayers?

Where similar programs with similar objectives exist, can those multiple programs be combined into one that provides better results at less cost?

Could a different governance model provide administrative savings while still remaining responsive to the needs of Saskatchewan people?

For example, the Ministry of Health will examine whether there are administrative efficiencies and savings to be achieved by reducing the number of health regions.

The Ministry of Social Services will review its suite of Income Assistance programs and services in order to make them simpler to administer, sustainable and easier for clients to understand while still providing the support to people in need.

It could even involve looking at the space government and its agencies occupy.

We will also take a deep look at government's sources of revenue.

The overall objectives of our province's revenue system must always be to keep Saskatchewan strong by keeping our economy strong and...

to ensure government revenues are sufficient to ensure important programs and services are sustainable now and in the future.

That includes a tax system that is competitive, simple and fair for all Saskatchewan taxpayers.

Those will be the principles of any changes to our tax system.

This will be an iterative process, beginning, but certainly not ending in this fiscal year.

STRONG ECONOMIC FOUNDATION

Even with the current challenges, Saskatchewan enjoys a strong economic foundation.

Last year, despite challenges in oil and potash, our province exported \$32.6 billion in goods to countries around the world, the second-highest exports total in our history.

Shipments to China and India were up 18 and 60 percent respectively in 2015.

And we exported goods to more than 150 countries in total.

Saskatchewan's agri-food sector led the charge, with more than \$15 billion in exports last year.

That exceeded the ambitious target laid out in the *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth* to export \$15 billion of agri-food products by 2020.

Our strength as an exporter of goods around the world will continue.

Nearly three-quarters of Saskatchewan Trade and Export Partnership members are forecasting an increase in exports in 2016.

We are a trading province and as such we ought to support efforts to expand trade partnerships around the world.

Our growing population is another economic pillar on which we can build.

Last year, Saskatchewan's population growth was the third-highest among provinces.

And our unemployment rate was the lowest in Canada.

Still, the impact of low oil prices has been felt.

Oil producers have cut production and investment, contributing to a decline in real GDP last year in Saskatchewan.

Our GDP is forecast to decline by 0.6 percent this year, with a return to growth of 2.5 percent forecast for 2017.

And so, our province's economy is expected to rebound as it has in the past.

Following the global financial crisis of 2008, in the five-year period beginning in 2010, Saskatchewan's real GDP growth averaged 3.9 percent per year.

Our ability to weather the storm is a testament to our province's economic strength, resilience, and diversity.

This budget strives to further strengthen and diversify our economy, investing prudently in people and infrastructure to keep Saskatchewan strong.

FISCAL PICTURE

This budget forecasts total revenue of \$14.02 billion this fiscal year.

And total expense of about \$14.46 billion.

That combines for a projected deficit in 2016-17 of \$434 million.

This deficit is not due to large increases in spending.

In fact, the expense side of the 2016-17 budget is up just two per cent.

By far the biggest factor in this year's deficit is a drop in resource revenues of nearly \$1 billion.

That decrease is offset somewhat by higher own-source revenue, including expected net revenue of \$148 million from land sales this fiscal year.

The Government of Saskatchewan is getting out of the farm land ownership business and getting these lands into the hands of producers.

Net income from Government Businesses Enterprises is also up, by about \$180 million.

This is largely due to better bottom lines forecast at the Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority, the commercial Crown corporations, and the Saskatchewan Auto Fund.

And higher transfers from the federal government are included, notably \$200 million related to the transfer of federal dams to the province.

Mr. Speaker, part of weathering the storm means continuing to invest where Saskatchewan people need it most—in health, education, and social services.

That's why our government has opted for a manageable deficit in this budget, rather than drastically cutting funding to those priority areas.

There are years when unforeseen events—drops in the price of oil or potash, or costly natural disasters—make it prudent to run a manageable deficit, rather than implement severe cuts to programs and services or increase taxes on Saskatchewan people, both of which could further shock the economy.

This is one of those years.

However, we are committed to returning the budget to balance by 2017-18.

That is our goal and our plan!

KEEPING TAXES LOW

Our government understands that low taxes are a key element of a strong economy.

Low taxes attract investment and new economic activity and help create jobs.

Since taking office, our government has cut the tax burden on Saskatchewan people and businesses by close to \$6 billion in total.

As a result, our province now has among the lowest personal and business tax rates in Canada.

Our government remains committed to keeping taxes low, especially during this challenging economic time.

Mr. Speaker, in keeping with the Premier's commitment during the recent election campaign, this budget contains no tax increases and no new taxes.

TAX EXPENDITURE CHANGES

This budget does contain two tax credit changes.

To help post-secondary graduates stay in the province and afford a home, we have introduced the Graduate Retention Program First Home Plan.

The Graduate Retention Program is one of the most aggressive youth retention programs in Canada, providing income tax credits to rebate up to \$20,000 in tuition fees to post-secondary graduates who stay in Saskatchewan after graduation.

Since its creation, about 63,000 post-secondary graduates have received nearly \$290 million in tuition rebates.

The new First Home Plan fulfils our campaign promise by giving eligible graduates the ability to use up to \$10,000 of their Graduate Retention Program tax credits toward the down payment on their first home.

Government's investment in the First Home Plan is expected to be \$8 million this fiscal year.

Making Saskatchewan more affordable for our young people, and helping them buy their first home, will keep more graduates—more of our sons and daughters—in the province.

And it will keep Saskatchewan strong.

This budget also ends the Active Families Benefit, a refundable personal income tax credit, saving the government \$5.5 million a year.

We believe community-based charities and organizations such as KidSport and Creative Kids will continue to be more effective at helping children from families with lower incomes participate.

A similar federal tax credit was eliminated in the recent federal budget.

INVESTING IN PEOPLE

Despite economic challenges, our government continues to invest in health care, education, and social services.

74 cents of every tax dollar that is paid by taxpayers in this province goes to these three areas.

We are committed to providing Saskatchewan people with access to timely and high-quality health services.

At the same time, we need to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the health system.

In this budget, total spending for health is projected to be a record \$5.6 billion, an increase of \$81 million or 1.5 percent compared to last year.

That level of funding will:

- improve access to care;
- reduce wait times for surgery and diagnostic services; and
- support innovative approaches to meet the needs of patients and families.

Regional Health Authorities will receive nearly \$3.4 billion, up 2.3 percent compared to last year.

This supports programs, services, and care provided through hospitals, health centers, and long-term care facilities across the province.

This budget fulfils another campaign promise by reducing Health Authority administration expenses by \$7.5 million and re-investing those savings in frontline staff in long-term care homes.

Reducing wait times continues to be a priority for our government.

Saskatchewan has gone from the longest surgical wait times in Canada in 2007 to the shortest wait times in Canada in 2015.

However, wait times have begun to creep up again in recent months.

That is why this budget provides a \$20 million boost to the Saskatchewan Surgical Initiative – to ensure Saskatchewan continues to have the shortest surgical wait times in the country.

We also want to reduce wait times for diagnostic services across the province, and are making targeted investments totaling about \$8 million in this budget to ensure that happens.

The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency is receiving more than \$167 million in funding in this budget, up \$9.8 million from last year.

This substantial increase in funding will help pay for the addition of 15 new cancer drugs that were approved last year.

This budget also provides close to \$15 million more, compared to last year, for the Drug Plan and Extended Benefits, providing for increased utilization as well as the approval last year of a treatment for Hepatitis C.

Mr. Speaker, in this budget our government continues to put students first by investing in pre-K to grade 12 schools and classrooms across the province.

Student success and safety has always been a priority for Saskatchewan parents and their children, and it's a priority of this government.

That's why this budget increases school operating funding to almost \$1.9 billion, up \$16.6 million or about 1 percent compared to last year.

This budget continues our government's support of early education and child care across the province.

This includes 810 new child-care spaces being developed as part of the 18 new elementary schools currently under construction on nine joint-use sites in Saskatoon, Regina, Warman, and Martensville.

This budget provides \$288 million to school divisions for learning supports in the 2016-17 school year—supporting students with intensive needs, students in vulnerable circumstances, and students who require support with the English language.

This includes a \$4 million increase for classroom supports provided through the Ministry of Education to meet the needs of a growing and diverse province.

In addition, \$5.4 million of school operating funding is being targeted to support Syrian refugee students.

This budget also includes funding of \$1.6 million for nearly 200 previously approved childcare spaces which are coming on-line this year.

This brings total funding for childcare to nearly \$53 million in this budget.

The number of licensed childcare spaces has increased by close to 5,800 since 2008, bringing the total to more than 14,600.

This budget also maintains our government's strong investment in post-secondary students and education to keep Saskatchewan strong.

Since taking office nearly nine years ago, our government has invested more than \$7.3 billion in post-secondary institutions and student supports.

In this budget, Saskatchewan's post-secondary schools continue to receive strong support, including:

- \$475 million for the Universities of Saskatchewan and Regina and their affiliated and federated colleges;
- \$156 million for Saskatchewan Polytechnic, the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, and the Gabriel Dumont Institute; and
- \$29 million for Saskatchewan's regional colleges.

That's a total of \$660 million this year in operating funding for Saskatchewan's post-secondary schools, comparable to what they received last year.

Our commitment to post-secondary students is also reflected in a range of programs aimed at helping them save and pay for school.

This budget provides more than \$53 million in direct support to students, including:

- \$32.5 million for the Student Aid Fund to provide student grants, bursaries, and loans;

- more than \$14 million for scholarships, including the Saskatchewan Advantage Scholarship; and
- \$6.5 million for the Saskatchewan Advantage Grant for Education Savings.

This budget also enhances or maintains a number of important job and skills training programs—including a \$2.4 million increase to the Canada-Saskatchewan Job Grant, for a total of \$6.4 million this year, to provide training that aligns with employer needs.

The budget also provides for the continuation of 9,000 Adult Basic Education training opportunities.

And the Employability Assistance for People with Disabilities program will continue to support more than 2,500 opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, supporting people in need also keeps Saskatchewan strong.

That's why this budget continues our government's substantial investments in programs for children, youth, families, people experiencing disability, and people who need income assistance and housing.

This budget invests close to \$17 million more, compared to last year, to support at-risk children, youth, and their families, including:

- nearly \$8 million more for medically fragile children and those with complex needs;
- \$5.7 million more for foster care and extended family care;
- \$2.3 million more in preventive services to keep children from coming into the Ministry's care; and

- \$800,000 more for assisted adoption.

Over the past nine years, our government has also demonstrated its unwavering commitment to helping the province's most vulnerable people.

This budget provides considerable support for new and enhanced programming for Saskatchewan people experiencing disability, as well as funding to address increased program utilization.

This includes:

- \$210 million dedicated to the SAID or Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability program for people experiencing significant and enduring disabilities; and
- \$3.4 million to address the emerging needs of people with intellectual disabilities, and support the transition of individuals from Valley View Centre as homes and programs become available.

Work on a third assessment and stabilization home—part of the safety net of supports for people with intellectual disabilities—will begin this year.

Through the Ministry of Social Services, this budget includes \$494 million for income assistance programs—including SAID—that support more than 30,000 individuals and families.

Mr. Speaker, for the 16 years prior to our government being elected, the Seniors' Income Plan, an income assistance program for low income seniors had not had an increase by so much as a dime.

Under our government over the last eight years we have tripled that assistance.

But, improved seniors' incomes means we'll need about \$250,000 less this year for the Seniors Income Plan.

However, our total funding commitment for that important program will continue to exceed \$26 million in 2016-17.

Revenue sharing plays an important role helping the province's municipalities meet the needs of people living in cities, towns, villages, and in rural Saskatchewan.

This year, municipal revenue sharing will approach \$272 million—up \$6.4 million from last year and an increase of \$144 million, or more than 113 percent, since 2007.

This is based on our government's commitment to ensure stable, predictable funding by providing the equivalent of one percentage point of the Provincial Sales Tax to Saskatchewan's municipalities.

Mr. Speaker, farming has always been important to Saskatchewan, but in recent years, the agriculture industry has really become a key driver of Saskatchewan's economy. We will continue to offer the programs and services producers need to keep their operations and the entire agriculture industry in Saskatchewan strong.

This budget increases Ministry of Agriculture funding by 7.5 percent this fiscal year, to a total of nearly \$390 million.

This includes more than \$254 million to fully fund agricultural business risk management programs—including AgriStability, AgriInvest, and Crop Insurance—a \$14.6 million increase from last year.

This budget also includes more than \$71 million for strategic initiatives under the federal-provincial Growing Forward 2 Agreement, with funding of close to \$27 million for agricultural research to support improvements in productivity and enhanced exports.

INVESTING IN INFRASTRUCTURE

Investing in infrastructure is another way we keep Saskatchewan strong—now and into the future.

This budget provides more than \$3.5 billion for infrastructure, the largest single-year capital investment in the province's history.

Nearly \$1.8 billion will be invested by our commercial Crowns and more than \$1.7 billion by executive government ministries and agencies this fiscal year.

Investing in infrastructure helps support jobs in construction when other sectors are feeling the downturn.

Investing in roads, highways, and bridges improves safety and expands and improves the transportation system—vital to an export-driven economy.

Investing in municipal infrastructure helps build our towns, cities, and communities.

Investing in schools creates better learning environments for children and post-secondary students.

Investing in hospitals and other health-care facilities helps ensure quality health care and long-term care for Saskatchewan people.

Mr. Speaker, in this budget, for the first time in the province's history, the Government of Saskatchewan will invest more than \$1 billion into the transportation system.

This puts our government well on our way to meeting our campaign commitment to invest \$2.7 billion into the transportation system over the next four years.

More than 1,300 kilometers of provincial highways will be repaired or upgraded this year, including much-needed repairs to many of our rural highways.

Funding has also been provided to continue work on major projects such as the twinning of Highways 7 and 16 near Saskatoon, and of Highway 39 between Estevan and Bienfait.

Construction will begin this year on new overpasses at Warman and Martensville, two of the most highly congested traffic areas in the province.

This budget also provides for continued planning for future twinning and passing lanes on Highways 6 and 39, and passing lanes on Highway 5 between Humboldt and Saskatoon.

This year, more than 100 kilometers of rural highways will be upgraded to improve safety and access, including Highway 354 near Dilke.

This budget also fulfils the first year of the Highways 2020 Plan—a three-year, \$70 million funding surge to fix more highways, announced in the recent election campaign

\$30 million of that total is being invested this fiscal year to repair many highways throughout the province, including:

- Highways 220 and 322 in the Sifton-Strasbourg area;
- Highway 924 to Dore Lake;
- Highway 340 north of Radisson;
- Highway 376 between Maymont and Asquith;
- Highway 45 south of Outlook; and
- Highway 58 between Chaplin and Shamrock.

\$500 million is being committed in this budget to continue work on the Regina Bypass, including new overpasses at Balgonie, White City, and the Pilot Butte access.

When it's complete in October 2019, the bypass will greatly enhance the movement of people and goods in our province and vastly improve traffic safety.

When we include the funding in this budget, our government will have invested more than \$6.3 billion, since coming to office, to improve more than 11,000 kilometers of roads and highways across Saskatchewan.

This budget provides more than \$127 million for municipal infrastructure this fiscal year, with plans to invest an additional \$325 million through 2019-20.

This budget provides \$10 million for the first year of a three-year, \$50 million commitment toward the North Commuter Parkway Bridge project in Saskatoon that will help ease congestion on existing bridges.

Mr. Speaker, our growing population means we need more schools.

This budget provides more than \$391 million for K to 12 schools and other education capital—up nearly \$143 million compared to last year.

This is the largest capital spend in the province's history for the education sector.

This significant investment supports the continuing construction of joint-use schools in the high-growth communities of Martensville, Warman, Saskatoon, and Regina.

Those facilities are slated to open for the 2017-18 school year—adding much-needed classroom capacity and childcare spaces.

This budget also provides major capital funding of nearly \$42 million for the renovation and repair of schools in Langenburg, Martensville, Gravelbourg, and St. Brieux, as well as Scott Collegiate and Sacred Heart Elementary in Regina.

Meanwhile, construction continues this year on the replacement of Regina's Connaught School.

This budget also provides \$38 million for preventive maintenance and renewal for our schools, up 20 percent compared to last year.

Mr. Speaker, over the next four years, almost \$700 million is targeted for K to 12 schools and other education capital.

Continuing investment in university, regional college, and other training facilities is also vital to keep Saskatchewan strong.

This budget provides nearly \$26 million in capital for advanced education and training, with an estimated \$170 million to be provided to this sector over the next four years.

This budget provides \$2.2 million for completion of the \$17.5 million renovation project at Southeast Regional College in Weyburn.

This fiscal year, maintenance capital and renewal funding in this sector will continue at \$23.6 million.

Since 2008, more than \$400 million has been provided through the Ministry of Advanced Education for capital in the post-secondary education and research sector.

This includes the Academic Health Sciences Facility and the International Vaccine Centre at the University of Saskatchewan; a new student residence at the University of Regina; and notable projects at Southeast, Parkland, Cumberland, and Carlton Trail Regional Colleges.

Mr. Speaker, Saskatchewan people deserve the best health care possible!

To help achieve that, we continue to invest heavily in health care infrastructure.

This budget commits nearly \$240 million to health care capital, part of a \$700 million investment over the next four years.

This budget provides final-year funding to complete construction of The Meadows long-term care facility in Swift Current, as well as the Kelvington Integrated Care facility, both slated to open this summer.

More than \$14 million is being provided for electrical upgrades at Regina's General and Pasqua hospitals and for a power plant upgrade at Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon.

Construction will continue on several major projects, including the new Children's Hospital in Saskatoon and the replacement of the Saskatchewan Hospital and Integrated Correctional Facility in North Battleford.

This budget includes more than \$50 million for health facility maintenance and equipment, up nearly \$7 million compared to last year.

This budget fulfils another campaign promise by providing \$500,000 to expand a pilot project that provides medical robotic technology to more northern communities.

This project allows health care professionals to connect with patients remotely and provide real-time assessment, diagnosis, and patient management.

Crown Corporation Capital

Our province's Crown corporations will invest nearly \$1.8 billion this fiscal year to upgrade utilities infrastructure and keep Saskatchewan strong.

Between 2000 and 2007, the Crowns spent, on average, about \$568 million a year on capital—including both maintenance capital and investment in new infrastructure.

Since our government took office, Crown capital investment has more than doubled—to \$1.4 billion annually between 2008 and 2014.

And we forecast that between 2015 and 2020, Saskatchewan's Crown corporations will invest an average of \$1.9 billion.

That's more than triple the amount invested between 2000 and 2007.

Major Crown capital projects for the current fiscal year include \$1.1 billion at SaskPower, primarily to renew electricity transmission and distribution systems.

SaskPower will also expand and renew electricity generation assets to meet Saskatchewan's growing power needs.

SaskTel is expected to invest more than \$330 million to upgrade its wireless and wireline networks across the province, improve customer service, and continue the rollout of infiNet, its high-bandwidth broadband service.

SaskEnergy will spend more than \$290 million, primarily to ensure a safe, reliable natural gas network through renewal of its transmission and distribution infrastructure, plus expansion of its gas processing capacity.

CONTROLLING SPENDING

Mr. Speaker, as we meet the challenges created by falling resource revenue, we will continue to control spending.

Controlling spending means making some difficult decisions as we strive to keep government's programs and services sustainable in the long term.

This year's budget includes some of those difficult but necessary decisions.

Fees under the children's and seniors' drug plans are rising by \$5 per prescription, to a maximum of \$25 per prescription.

The last time government increased the cost of prescriptions under these plans was in 2012, when fees rose from \$15 to \$20 per prescription.

Since then, drug plan costs have grown by an average of \$10 million annually.

So we are raising fees by \$5 per prescription to help keep the plans sustainable and prescription costs in line with other provinces.

Increases are expected to impact 66,000 families by approximately \$20 a year on average and 120,000 seniors by approximately \$80 annually, on average.

To keep them sustainable, certain justice and corrections programs are receiving less funding this year.

And the Buffalo Narrows Community Correctional Centre is being closed.

At full capacity, it houses 18 inmates who will be transferred to other facilities in the province.

The closure is expected to save the province more than \$660,000 this year and just over \$1 million annually.

Revenue sharing is intended to provide municipalities with the financial means to address their priorities.

But if municipal funding is to remain sustainable, certain supports need to be rationalized as we move forward with transformational change.

That's why in this budget provincial funding has been discontinued for five urban municipal parks:

- River Valley in Battlefords;
- Pehonan in Prince Albert;
- Chinook Parkway in Swift Current;
- Moose Jaw's Wakamow; and
- Tatagwa in Weyburn.

This will save the province a total of \$540,000 annually.

We believe the funding of municipal parks is best left for municipalities to prioritize.

Also, funding for some labour market training programs has been reduced by about \$3.5 million to better reflect utilization levels, demand and program realignment.

Areas of highest priority and need including the Canada Saskatchewan Job Grant and Employability for People with Disabilities are seeing increases.

We are removing the grandfathering provision from the Saskatchewan Employment Supplement.

In 2015-16 the supplement changed to be open to applicants with children 12 years old and under.

However the change included a grandfathering provision that resulted in families who were already in the program eligible to receive support for children 13 years old and over.

Removing this provision focuses the program on those with highest need, and combined with projected lower utilization, the province is forecast to save \$2.5 million in 2016-17.

In addition, a number of social services and assistance program changes will be introduced this year to increase fairness and equity among clients and enhance the sustainability of the programs, while ensuring that vulnerable citizens receive the supports they need.

Mr. Speaker, also as part of spending control in this budget, we have decided to defer funding to various initiatives.

We have deferred funding earmarked for the Health Sciences facility project at the University of Saskatchewan to future years—recognizing that \$230 million of the province's total \$250 million commitment to that project has already been provided.

This budget suspends funding for the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Water Security for this fiscal year.

Support will be considered in future years.

Those are some of the difficult decisions we have taken in this budget. There are many difficult decisions made as well, across all areas of government, to control spending.

Moving forward, as part of the 2017-18 budget process and beyond, we will accelerate the government-wide process of transformational change.

This means ensuring the sustainability of high-quality public services for the people of Saskatchewan, and ensuring we will deliver them in the most efficient, effective way possible.

CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges in our resource sector, Saskatchewan's finances remain relatively strong.

Our budget deficit is smaller and more manageable than those of our neighboring provinces.

Our debt-to-GDP ratio is the second-lowest among the provinces, and we continue to receive solid credit ratings.

This year we begin a process of transformational change to secure a sustainable balance between the costs of providing vital programs and services people need and the Province's revenue base.

This budget helps keep Saskatchewan strong by keeping our provincial finances strong, and will help us pursue our goal of returning our budget to surplus by 2017-18.

This budget helps keep Saskatchewan strong by controlling spending and by keeping taxes low.

This budget helps keep Saskatchewan strong by providing funding for highways, hospitals, schools, and other important infrastructure projects.

And this budget keeps Saskatchewan strong by investing in people.

By ensuring support for children, students, families, working people, and those who are most vulnerable.

Ultimately, Saskatchewan people will keep our province strong.

By furthering their education, raising a family, starting a small business, volunteering for a local charity....

“From many peoples strength.”

Our province’s motto reflects our belief in each other and our confidence in the future.

Mr. Speaker, just a few weeks ago, the people of Saskatchewan voted for a Premier and a Party who promised to keep Saskatchewan strong.

The people of this province expect their government to manage through economic challenges, through prudent and pragmatic solutions.

This budget continues that approach while laying out a plan to get back to balance.

Together, we will continue building a great province with a brighter future
and together, we will keep Saskatchewan strong!