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Canadian Union of Public Employees
Saskatchewan Division

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Province's largest union calls for priority social spending ahead of budget

REGINA – With the provincial budget set to be released later today, Saskatchewan's largest public sector union is calling for priority social spending that addresses Saskatchewan's growing un-affordability, restores previous government cuts in education, and suspends further private health care schemes in favour of renewed investments that build capacity within the public health care system.

"With Saskatchewan's economy performing well, forecasts indicating continued economic growth in our province and historically high provincial revenues, it is our hope today's budget makes an effort to relieve the pressure of a growing cost of living, restores previous cuts and makes the cost-effective choice to ditch further private, for-profit health care initiatives," said Tom Graham, President of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)—Saskatchewan.

Statistics Canada reports that consumer prices continued to rise on a year-to-year basis with items like gasoline, food and the cost of shelter posting large increases while the availability of affordable rental units persists as a problem in Saskatchewan's largest cities. The union notes that investments in subsidized child care and increased direct investments in social and affordable housing programs would go a long way in easing the cost of living strain facing far too many Saskatchewan families.
In education, Graham is looking for the government to find the funds to keep rural schools open to prevent cases like the expected closure of the Bjorkdale school which would result in long bus rides of nearly three hours or more for children. The union is also hopeful the government will restore previous cuts to educational assistants (EAs) with the anticipated introduction of a new permanent funding model for the province's K-12 school system.

"The new education funding model expected to be announced in detail today should include the funds to reverse the cut of hundreds of educational assistants made by this government," said Graham. Freedom of Information requests reveal that over 350 educational assistants have been cut in nearly 80 per cent of school divisions across the province since the provincial government announced its policy to reduce educational assistants combined with constrained education funding. In the same time period, the number of disabled and intensive need students has increased by over 700.

"If they can find more than a million-and-a-half dollars extra to give private schools in our province, certainly they can find the funds to bring back the educational assistants that support learning disabled students and children with intensive needs," said Graham.

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Suspending further health care privatization is also a priority for the union. “Whether it is the special Amicus deal which will cost taxpayers up to $20 million more or pricey private, for-profit surgery contracts, the government’s health care privatization schemes are proving to cost us more and ignore the cost-efficiencies of investing in our public system,” said Graham.

A recently released report by Dr. John Loxley commissioned by the union after the Provincial Auditor flagged concerns about the special Amicus deal reveals that the private long-term care facility under construction in Saskatoon could cost the province up to $20 million more than if the government had followed traditional funding practices. The union also points to an arbitrator’s ruling in 2010 which restricted Regina Qu’Appelle Health Region’s contracting-out plans giving an end date of 2013 to the region’s controversial award of surgical contracts to for-profit clinics. “If this budget finally found the funds to build the long postponed Regina Public Ambulatory Surgery Centre, it would go a long way in improving our health care system while, at the same time, realize the cost savings investing in the public system can bring,” said Graham.

Graham also noted that more funds for infrastructure—like water and sewer systems—would be another positive investment by the provincial government and further ease the infrastructure deficit experienced by many of the province’s cities and rural municipalities. Consideration of increasing royalty rates in the future would also benefit the province in realizing a better return on a key source of revenue for the province. Resource revenues already account for more than 26 per cent of the province’s total revenues and is predicted to rise to nearly 30 per cent by the Fiscal Year 2014-2015.

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