

Consultation

Summary Report

Budget 2018

A recovery built to last

MARCH 22, 2018

Alberta 

Budget 2018 Consultation Summary report

Executive summary

Government sought input from across the province to gather feedback and identify issues that matter most to Albertans leading up to the release of Budget 2018.

Finance Minister Joe Ceci and other cabinet ministers held roundtable discussions with stakeholders in the health care, non-profit, labour, post-secondary, energy, education, social services, culture and tourism and business sectors from December 2017 to January 2018. The meetings explored the participants' priorities as government developed its plans to protect the public services Albertans rely on while continuing to find savings and efficiencies.

On November 30, 2017, the Finance Minister met with the chief economists from Canada's major banks and financial institutions to hear their insights into Alberta's economy and growth projections for 2018.

Along with these experts and stakeholders from across many sectors, the Minister travelled the province and met with Albertans. Albertans were also invited to share their budget thoughts and feedback through online submissions. In all, 3,436 individual survey submissions were received along with 188 emails and 70 written submissions.

Premier Rachel Notley and Minister Ceci hosted two 90-minute telephone town halls were held on February 6 and 7, 2018, one each for the northern and southern regions of Alberta. Nearly 31,000 Albertans took the opportunity to directly connect with the Premier and Finance Minister and share their concerns and priorities ahead of Budget 2018.

Summary of comments received

Economy

Albertans voiced support for economic diversification, the energy industry and business in general across the province.

Diversification: Several respondents want the government to continue pushing for economic diversification.

- "Economic diversification is key. Lessening our reliance on the oil industry should be a priority. Clean energy products, job training in other industries and a focus on attracting modern, innovative industries to the province would help."
- "Relying on royalty revenue to fund government prevents us from investing in skill training and economic diversification, and subjects our province to a perpetual oil price roller-coaster."

- “More jobs, more technology and more diversification through proper programs to commercialize internationally.”

Energy industry: Feedback also indicated Albertans still recognize the vital importance of the energy industry, and encourage government to continue supporting it.

- “The Government should be doing everything in its power to protect, encourage and support the oil and gas industry. The only way we can protect vital services such as health care and education is having the revenue to pay for those services.”
- “Government of Alberta should protect and expand our ability to get our crude to new markets and strengthen alliances with our existing markets.”
- “More should be done to encourage oil and gas companies to stay in the province.”

Support for business: Many respondents suggested government pursue policies that encourage the growth of business and investment.

- “Improve access to capital and create easier paths for new business investment.”
- “The government should reduce red tape and increase investment in Alberta through clear, concise policy, and removing barriers for investment.”
- “Draw new businesses/industries to Alberta and maintain existing businesses/industries with attractive incentives as businesses employing people and encouraging spending.”
- “The Government of Alberta should be ensuring that the economy is vital. Reducing barriers to small business would facilitate this.”

Health

Health care remains a top priority for Albertans, but many respondents would like to explore ways to find efficiencies

Maintain funding: Some respondents urged government to invest more in the health care system.

- “Albertans deserve great service and access to the supports they need. That requires staff who are properly supported, trained, and funded.”
- “Get more hospital beds and community health centres to keep up with population growth.”
- “The funding provided to health care needs to be heavily focused in the area of primary health care and funding nurse practitioners in the community. There is significant evidence supporting increased funding in primary care and a correlation in improving

health outcomes, reducing chronic disease, and reducing the financial strain on the acute health care system.”

Cutting costs: Many responses asked for government to find efficiencies and reduce overall health costs, including privatizing certain aspects of care and reinstating premiums.

- “Protecting vital services does not mean giving them more money or even the same amount of money. Find efficiencies.”
- “Reduce spending in healthcare by finding inefficiencies.”
- “Bring back the Alberta Health Care premiums.”

Mental health supports: Albertans recognize the need for specialized mental health supports, including addiction services.

- “There is virtually nothing available to help teens with severe mental health issues. Wait lists are ridiculous and distances to travel are prohibitive.”
- “More mental health, specifically addiction support services.”
- “Mental health care is becoming a bigger issue for our society and Albertans have the right to receive quick services for mental health issues.”

Adding new coverage: Some responses indicated an interest in adding dental and eye care to the list of services covered by provincial health care.

- “Capping dental fees needs to be examined. As an Albertan without employee benefits, dental care for myself and my family is by far our biggest out of pocket medical expense.”
- “Better vision and dental care covered by Alberta Health Services.”
- “We need a program for dental care that regular people can afford.”

Education

Along with health care, respondents identified education as one of their top priorities. Input was received on reducing class sizes, public and private school options and post-secondary funding.

Reducing class sizes: Many respondents hold the opinion that more must be done to limit class sizes.

- “Do more to reduce class sizes and get support for teachers.”

- “Class sizes and composition need to be addressed, as they are currently out of control. Class sizes are huge, school divisions aren't meeting the recommended average, let alone a hard cap. There needs to be a cap on class sizes, and they need to be met.”
- “K-12 class sizes are far too large, student learning conditions are being negatively impacted because our teachers are overworked both inside and outside the classroom.”

Public and private school funding: Feedback on this subject varied from calls to amalgamate public and separate schools to support for continuing to fund the separate and private education systems.

- “Change legislation to publicly fund only ‘public schools’ and secondary institutions and stop funding the Catholic School system.”
- “Amalgamate school boards. Keep Catholic schools but have them operate under public school boards.”
- “Continuing to fund independent schools is a great cost-saving approach. Alberta's diverse education system, while giving parents choice in their children's education, saves the tax-payer a lot of money. This is a win-win situation for everyone.”

Post-secondary funding: Most respondents on this subject supported maintaining funding for post-secondary institutions, while some called for an end to the tuition freeze.

- “The government should protect funding to post-secondary institutions, especially colleges, as they provide our citizens with the tools they need to be contributing members of society and feed into our provincial tax system to support social programs. The more people working, the less people accessing public support systems.”
- “Higher learning institutions already have it rough from the previous years of poor budgeting considerations and funding - don't make it any harder on them when there are other areas you could ease up on. At most freeze, don't cut, secondary education funding.”
- “Post-secondary education needs to be protected to remain affordable for Alberta students. If Alberta is going to continue to diversify and expand our economy into sectors beyond the oil and gas sector and agriculture we need to educate and attract young people to lead that growth into new economic sectors.”

Infrastructure

Respondents addressing infrastructure discussed the need to address Alberta's infrastructure deficit, and maintain our road and highway systems.

Infrastructure: Albertans were generally supportive of continuing to fund infrastructure at or near current levels.

- “We have an infrastructure deficit and that needs to be addressed.”
- “Uphold infrastructure spending, both for necessary new infrastructure and for the maintenance of existing infrastructure.”
- “Ensure that the immense infrastructure maintenance deficit accrued over the past 40 years is mitigated.”
- “Please continue to invest capital in public infrastructure - we still have a significant infrastructure deficit in schools and postsecondary institutions and can make far better use of existing buildings by modernizing and upgrading them rather than demolishing and replacing old buildings.”
- “Maintaining the infrastructure growth that the government has already made huge pushes towards.”

Road and highway maintenance: Opinions on the road and highway systems reflect a desire to better maintain the important transportation routes.

- “Without proper maintenance, our roads will cost more in the long run, and they’re required to maintain safety.”
- “Fix our roads, highways, and over- and underpasses.”

Environment

Albertans providing input demonstrated a desire to improve environmental protections, pursue renewable energy and invest in public transit.

Environmental protections: Some respondents asked for environmental protections to be maintained and, in some cases, expanded.

- “Protect, conserve and manage Alberta's protected areas. Increasing outdoor recreational opportunities that promote healthy, active lifestyles.”
- “Environmental protection (e.g. headwaters, species at risk) and wildlife conservation are things that are relatively cheap to conserve, but extremely expensive to bring back.”
- “Environmental protections should be preserved at current levels.”

Renewable energy: Albertans tend to see renewable energy as a growing sector that deserves government support.

- “Renewable energy resources such as solar or wind energy should be a focus of the 2018 budget.”
- “Moving ahead with wind and solar power is important, as is exploring energy storage and power grid management technology so that our power system remains stable after the coal phase out.”
- “The Government of Alberta should protect and expand Alberta's burgeoning renewable energy industry by offering greater financial and legislative support to geothermal developers trying to harness geothermal energy.”
- “The government should fund or create programs that offer subsidized training in renewables for laid off oil and gas workers. There should also be funding going to build the renewable industry and other modern industries.”

Public transportation: Input on public transportation spending ranged from those who support it and its benefits, to those who would like to see spending reduced.

- “Job-creating infrastructure projects such as the Green Line in Calgary will help us protect the environment and mitigate climate change.”
- “Government should protect access to public transportation, to reduce the climate change impacts of vehicles.”
- “Public transportation needs to be developed in all regions of Alberta. The ability to access necessities such as health care and education requires transportation and if one does not have their own transportation, hardships ensue. No transportation leads to isolation, leads to decreased health and increased needs for those health services.”
- “Reduce capital spending on public transportation.”

Government spending

Many respondents call for cuts to public sector expenses and general government spending. Others asked government to continue to spend as needed to support essential services.

Public sector wages and benefits: Much of the input on this subject indicated a desire to reduce expenses, while some respondents want to protect public services.

- “Cuts to the public sector do exactly that - hurt the public. I would not advise cutting the public sector.”
- “Reduce size of public service in a controlled way, primarily by attrition.”
- “Reduce public sector wage spending through hiring freezes, salary freezes, and layoffs.”

General spending feedback: Some Albertans asked government to make cuts to spending in pursuit of debt reduction, and others asked government to continue supporting the programs and services they rely on.

- "Health and education cannot be considered sacred cows at the expense of all other areas. Budget cuts need to be shared equally across all areas of government, municipalities, universities, schools & hospitals."
- "Healthcare and education are key areas we should continue to protect."
- "Continue to protect the health care and education services."

Taxes

Submissions dealing with taxes mainly addressed concern about the impact of the carbon levy, the desire to implement a provincial sales tax to raise revenues, and an overall desire to increase revenues in general.

Carbon levy: Some respondents mentioning the carbon levy did share concerns about its potential negative effects, while others expressed a desire to see it remain in place.

- "While the small businesses had a reduction in their taxes, the carbon tax brought them back to where they were."
- "Protect the carbon tax, so it can be re-allocated to as many alternatives as possible."
- "Please ensure that the carbon levy money is maximally used for carbon-reduction measures."
- "Use the carbon tax to help preserve green spaces and minimize our effect on climate change."

Provincial Sales Tax: Many submissions read that Alberta should join other provinces in implementing a provincial sales tax to generate more revenue for essential services. Some respondents resisted this idea.

- "I think this is less of a spending problem and more of a revenue problem. After reading of leading economists indicating a sales tax is the best way to address gaps, I see it as a necessary part of our path forward. It is time for a PST."
- "At this time, I am opposed to a PST, although I understand the opinion of economists that it is a good way to raise revenue."
- "The government should not be considering a PST. Say no to additional taxation, the budget shortfall should be managed through finding efficiencies within the existing government."

Taxes general: Opinions on taxation in Alberta ranged from suggestions to increase certain tax levels to help balance the budget, to calls for cuts to spur economic activity.

- “The government should introduce further progressive reforms to Alberta’s tax system that would lead to a more equitable collection and distribution of our financial resources. The Government should raise more revenues in a predictable way, in order to be able to maintain and expand the current level of valuable public services and social supports.”
- “We must start the discussion on the revenue side. You cannot cut your way to balance. Alberta needs to revisit the revenue side.”
- “Reduce taxes to facilitate consumer spending.”

Supports for vulnerable Albertans

Many submissions asked for increased funding to many of the supports that help address disadvantaged populations in Alberta. These mainly centered on Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), access to justice, sexual assault supports, and general services for disadvantaged Albertans.

Increase AISH funding: Respondents expressed concern that AISH recipients are not receiving enough income to live comfortably.

- “With the cost of everything going up and the minimum wage increase my monthly AISH payment will not cover the increases in groceries for the month.”
- “Please consider the thousands of individuals on AISH, and increase their allotment to be proportionate to the increased cost of living.”

Access to justice: Submissions dealing with the justice system requested increased enforcement and court resources.

- “Law enforcement should be a priority, there are too few RCMP and City Police to protect our citizens. The province should be a leader and put more funds toward enhancing our police forces.”
- “Public security, correctional services, court services, legal services all need support. Staying charges for criminals and releasing them back onto our streets is not acceptable, especially when it is the result of understaffed courts. Maintaining justice & order in our province must be a high priority. The government cannot endanger the hard-working people of Alberta by letting criminals walk free.”
- “Expand sheriff program and invest in more infrastructure for a stronger justice system.”

Sexual assault supports: Many Albertans recognized a cultural shift due to the 'Me Too' movement, and asked that provincial resources for sexual assault survivors be increased to help those who are dealing with a very challenging issue.⁰

- "There has been a drastic increase in the need for sexual assault services. Please increase the budget for local sexual assault centres across the province. Sexual assault and sexual abuse is a highly stigmatized issue, and it is difficult for survivors to come forward and be willing to access support."
- "Sexual violence presents a major risk to public safety. It is time to turn attention and resources to this crisis."
- "Funding for specialized sexual violence centres is needed, especially with the growing number of survivors who are coming forward seeking help."

Services for disadvantaged Albertans: Respondents showed concern for the issues facing the disabled, children in care, seniors and those facing housing issues.

- "Vocational and residential programs are necessary and provide quality of life for people with disabilities. The economic benefit to Alberta is strengthened by people with disabilities working and volunteering in our communities."
- "Seniors services such as additional home care, dental care and those programs that would contribute to their wellness. The wellness and independence of seniors is the most economical approach in the long term. Help keep us out of institutional care."
- "Social housing must be made an absolute priority moving forward. Rural Indigenous communities are facing a crisis."
- "Social services including adequate housing, and addressing poverty are also essential for the Government of Alberta to protect. It is only by addressing the social determinants of health that we will be able to stabilize and ideally decrease acute health care costs."
- "Social housing is important for people in these tough economic times as well. Please continue to support efforts to reduce homelessness in this province."