

Premier Alison Redford was in southern Alberta last week and took time to visit the community before attending a constituency meeting with local party faithful and other regional dignitaries. In an exclusive interview with The Taber Times, Redford outlined her party's plans for the province in the lead-up to a much anticipated provincial budget to be handed down in March. "I think it's going to be what we've talked about, which is when we see this gap, this gap in the differential which was just unprecedented. The federal Conservatives have been dealing with this issue, I understand Minister Flaherty was just talking about it again, talking about how this is such a volatile time for the federal government. Of course it is for us. I've talked about the fact that there is a \$6 billion revenue gap. We're going to have to tighten our belts, even though there are more people coming to the province every year — 100,000 people a year. It's funny, 100,000 doesn't seem like a lot, until you think that's a million over 10 years. That's a lot of people."

The huge population influx anticipated by the province over the next decade mandates a maintained focus on infrastructure concerns.

"We want to make sure that when people come, and this is an area where a lot of people are coming to, we want to make sure that when people come, they have the same quality of life that we've had as Albertans for a long time. And that means investing in schools, and family care clinics, and roads and hospitals. And making sure we're putting in place the infrastructure that we need. So the first thing that we're going to do is we're going to keep investing in infrastructure."

Disguising a thinly-veiled attack on the official opposition, Redford indicated Albertans made a choice to support infrastructure investment during the most recent provincial election.

"We think that was a fundamental message that Albertans sent to us in the last provincial election. People had a very clear choice as to what they wanted, and they talked about wanting to have a long-term commitment to infrastructure. The reality is, that debate during the provincial election was not about how long to spend paying for infrastructure, it was another party saying if there's no money in the bank, we will not build infrastructure. Not we'll build a little bit. And frankly, where we are right now means no infrastructure would be being built."

Allowing an infrastructure deficit to grow and expand will only off-load future problems onto the back of generations of young Albertans, added Redford.

"The first thing we'll do, and I've talked about that, is we'll keep investing in infrastructure in the long term, because you can't afford to get behind. And we know growing up in this province what happens when you get behind. We're going to be holding the line on government spending. You can't deal with this as a revenue issue alone, you've got to deal with this by looking at our own systems, and making sure that the programs that we're providing are relevant for people, and actually achieving what Albertans want."

Wishing to dispel speculation, Redford pooh-poohed any talk about tax hikes or re-instituting health care premiums.

"Clearly, the other thing I have to say, because the political rhetoric takes off from now on — we're not increasing taxes, we're not bringing in a health care premium, and we think that we're going to be able to move through this, and work on the economy. We have three priorities. We are going to keep supporting families and communities, and that is going to be through sustainable programming, it's going to be through infrastructure. We're going to make sure that we are accountable for tax dollars — we're going to be responsible, and prudent, and

transparent. And we're going to keep building markets, because we've got to get our products to market."

Recent talks with New Brunswick Premier David Alward over shipping Alberta's bitumen to the east coast has sparked yet another pipeline debate in the province, which is desperately seeking pipeline capacity in order to receive top dollar for oil sands bitumen on the world market.

"We have wonderful resources in this province, not just oil and gas, we have agriculture and forestry. Value added in those areas is important, in terms of economic diversification, but we're going to spend a lot of time doing things like I did this week — meeting with the premier of New Brunswick, talking about pipelines, because we've got to get this product to tidewater. Keystone XL, I'm cautiously optimistic about. We have very good prospects to move this east, and we want to move hard on this."

Redford was able to tour and observe a facet of local health care delivery in the community upon her arrival.

"I was just over at the primary care network, meeting with the whole team really, and I was just amazed to see the effectiveness of what they're doing as a multi-disciplinary health team, who are really providing great service, and great access to people — which really does have to be a model as we go forward."

In agriculture, the premier touted the importance of the region to Alberta's agriculture and the potential to make the area a cutting-edge research hub for value-added innovation and development.

"It is really important if you think about the proximity of Taber to Lethbridge, and the work that's going on at the college and the university, around value-added in agriculture, even new technologies — wind and solar and renewables, and water technologies. All of that allows this part of the world to become a centre of excellence in research and innovation, which I think again changes the complexion of what economic opportunities are here, not only for people that may choose to come here, but for generations that will stay. But it's got to be about long-term planning and investing in the infrastructure, and knowing that's the kind of commitment you need to make to grow the province."

Redford also touched on an important research project ongoing at the University of Lethbridge to grow poppies for pharmaceutical purposes.

"One of the things that we think is going to be important in the upcoming budget is making sure that we're supporting applied research, that really leads to economic development, and this is a project where Alberta is one of only four places in the world that can grow this particular plant for pharmaceutical purposes, and so there's incredible research being done on how to grow that plant, and how to make it successful here, and it's going very well."