

August 25, 2004

Summary of Alberta Government Consultations

The "It's Your Future" survey, launched August 25, is the latest consultation undertaken by the Alberta government to gain feedback and input from Albertans. Over the past four years, the government has undertaken dozens and dozens of public consultations of varying size and scope. Here is a summary of some of the major consultations and how the government responded.

Major Consultations

Future Summit (2002)

The Summit brought together Albertans from across the province to identify priorities for the province's future. The participants concluded Alberta needs to maintain and enhance its advantages in: the economy, learning, fiscal responsibility, communities, health and wellness, the environment and governance.

Government actions:

- Based on the Summit's recommendations, the government launched the Energy Innovation Network (EnergyINet), an Alberta-led initiative to coordinate Canada's energy research efforts, and a Life Sciences Strategy.
- The Alberta Learning Commission conducted the first comprehensive review of Alberta's K-12 education system since 1972.
- The government established a sustainability fund to protect core programs and services by managing the ups and downs of resource revenue.
- The government balanced the budget year after year and eliminated the debt.
- The government conducted a province-wide survey on the future of the Heritage Fund asking Albertans how they wanted to see the Heritage Fund managed.
- Government developed a new Water Strategy to protect the quality and sustain the quantity of Alberta's water supply.

Premiers' Advisory Council on Health (2001-02)

The Premiers' Advisory Council on Health report – also known as the Mazankowski report – was the product of more than a year of consultations with 31 different health-related organizations, providers and individual Albertans.

Government actions:

- In response to the report's recommendations, the Alberta government:
 - Increased health spending to \$8.3 billion a year, an increase of \$2 billion since 2001/02. That includes an additional \$700 million allocated in June 2004 specifically to address the kinds of issues identified in the Mazankowski report, such as waiting times and access to surgeries.
 - Reduced the number of health regions from 17 to nine.
 - Introduced a new delivery system for mental health services, transferring responsibility for mental health services from the Alberta Mental Health Board to regional health authorities.
 - Introduced an on-line Wait List Registry, which shows accurate and current wait times for surgeries and procedures available across the province.

- introduced electronic health records that allow health care providers to access a patient's pertinent medical information immediately by computer.

Commission on Learning (2003)

The Commission conducted an extensive public consultation on Albertans' views and ideas for the future of education in Alberta. Albertans indicated that class sizes should be reduced, there should be greater emphasis on fine arts and second-language learning, and increased supports for Aboriginal students and students with special needs.

Government actions:

- 86 of 95 commission recommendations are being implemented.
- In July 2004, the government announced \$149 million in additional funding to reach the Learning Commission's class-size guidelines, two years sooner than recommended.

Financial Management Commission (2002)

The Commission was created to look at all aspects of Alberta's financial and accounting operations. It received submissions from 89 individuals and organizations. Two proposals centered on addressing volatile revenues and creating a fund to meet infrastructure pressures.

Government actions:

- The government established a Sustainability Fund separate from the Alberta Heritage Savings Fund to stabilize volatile resource revenue.
- It also created a three-year capital plan to address critical infrastructure pressures.

Survey: It's Your Money (2000)

A mail-out to every household in Alberta asked what the government should do with unexpected revenues and savings from interest charges as the province's remaining accumulated debt was paid down. The feedback was clear: introduce permanent tax cuts and one-time rebates.

Government actions:

- The government phased-in more than \$1.5 billion in personal income tax savings between 1999 and 2001 culminating in the introduction of a single-rate tax system. Indexing credits to inflation ensured those savings are not eroded over time.
- A focus was also put on increasing funds for areas Albertans told the government were their priorities: health, education and infrastructure, while at the same time continue to pay down the debt
- As well, the government introduced the natural gas rebate program – the only program of its kind in North America – plus electricity rebates and an energy refund tax that returned \$1680 to the average Alberta household.

Agriculture consultations (2000-2003)

In 2000 and 2001, an Ag Summit was held to solicit Albertans' opinions on how to ensure the agricultural sector can meet the challenges of today's global marketplace. On the recommendation of the Ag Summit, the government launched an MLA Committee on Rural Sustainability in 2003, which gathered Albertans' opinions on a vision for rural development in Alberta. The committee recently submitted its report to government. In the fall of 2003, the government commissioned an Ipsos-Reid survey of 600 Alberta wheat and barley growers on the subject of marketing choice. Results of the survey concluded that 71 per cent of producers want changes made to the grain-marketing system to provide more marketing choice.

Government actions:

- Based on the recommendations of the Ag Summit, government restructured its agriculture department, emphasizing agricultural entrepreneurship and innovation.

- As well, government launched the toll-free Ag-Info call centre to further link producers with government information and production advice.
- In June 2003, Alberta signed the Agriculture Policy Framework, a five-year federal/provincial agreement that funds initiatives in business risk management, the environment and food safety.
- The government established the Rural Development cross-government initiative in 2003.
- Government launched the *Choice Matters* information campaign to encourage the federal government to establish a test market for wheat and barley.

“Water for Life” Strategy (2003)

The government consulted extensively with Albertans during the development of a provincial water strategy.

Government actions:

- Based on input from Albertans, the government introduced the “Water for Life” strategy in 2003 to guide the province’s water management strategies in the coming years.
- It appointed a provincial Water Council to guide implementation of the strategy.
- It invested \$25 million to improve regional water systems.
- It launched a review of drinking water treatment facilities.
- It appointed a committee to examine ways to reduce the water use for oilfield injection.

Climate change (2002-2003)

The government consulted with Albertans in developing a provincial climate change strategy. As a result, the province now has a provincial climate change strategy and has taken tangible action to address climate change.

Government actions:

- Alberta introduced Canada's first legislation to address greenhouse gas emissions - the *Climate Change and Emissions Management Act* - passed in the Fall of 2003.
- The government committed to purchase 90% green power for its facilities by 2005.
- It introduced a \$100-million interest-free loan program to help municipalities with energy efficiency initiatives.
- It made over \$30 million in commitments for technology and innovation and energy efficiency initiatives

The MLA Committee on Strengthening Alberta’s Role in Confederation (2004)

The committee was established in 2003 to explore ways to strengthen Alberta’s position in Canada. It received more than 700 submissions. The committee’s was released in August 2004.

Government actions:

- The government is studying the recommendations and is already acting in some areas highlighted in the report, including: senate reform, health care reform, support for marketing choice for producers, and attaining agreement from the federal government to formalize provincial involvement in negotiations of international agreements affecting areas of provincial jurisdiction.

Examples of Other Consultations

Child Welfare Act review

In 2001 and 2002, the government conducted a comprehensive review of Alberta’s *Child Welfare Act*. More than 600 written submissions were received and over 140 meetings held. As a result, the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* was passed and will come into effect on November 1, 2004. It focuses on

delivering services to families, establishing permanency for children, involving families in decision-making, building partnerships within the community and increasing access to information contained in adoption records. This consultation also resulted in the development of the first legislation of its kind in Canada, the *Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act*, to assist families who have a child with a disability.

Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying

The Roundtable was aimed at gathering Albertans' ideas on how better to address family violence. An action plan resulting from the consultation will be presented to government in the fall of 2004.

Reviews of Policing, Corrections, Victims Programs

Government undertook consultations as part of comprehensive reviews of Alberta's police services, corrections system, and programs that support victims of crime. As a result of these consultations, government increased funding for policing by \$58 million in Budget 2004, introduced a new funding formula for policing, implemented common police recruiting and training standards, and boosted funding for victims of crime programs by \$13.2 million over three years. Government is also hiring more probation officers and banning smoking in provincial jails.

Heritage Fund survey

In fall 2002, the government conducted a survey on the future of the Heritage Fund. More than 77,000 Albertans responded. They indicated that the Heritage Fund should be used primarily for saving, should be maintained for the long-term, and should continue to operate as an endowment Fund. Government is doing just that, and is considering options that will further strengthen the Heritage Fund and ensure it continues to benefit Albertans.

Charitable gaming consultations

Government consulted with charitable and religious organizations in the fall of 2002 on the use of gaming proceeds. As a result, adult sports groups (with a youth component) and non-profit licensed child care organizations were allowed to access gaming funds.

Low-Income Review

More than 6,000 Albertans made representations to an MLA committee reviewing Alberta's programs for low-income people. The feedback indicated that the income support programs were too complex and difficult to understand, and could do a better job encouraging Albertans to work. The government responded by introducing the new "Alberta Works" initiative in March 2004, which streamlined programs, removed inconsistencies, and ensured income support and training are targeted to individual needs. The government also made health benefits available to more people leaving welfare for work.

For media inquiries, please contact:

Jerry Bellikka
Director of Communications
Alberta Finance
(780) 427-5364

This backgrounder is available on the Alberta Finance homepage at: <http://www.finance.gov.ab.ca>