

Manitoba throne speech promises plan to move railways, end to child-care wait ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Manitoba's NDP government has delivered a pre-election throne speech that includes plans to move rail lines out of Winnipeg with the help of a new "rail park" and a pledge to end wait times for child-care spaces in five years.

The speech, read by Lt.-Gov. Janice Filmon on Monday, will be the last for Premier Greg Selinger and his government before Manitobans go to the polls on April 19.

Among other things, the throne speech mentions plans by CentrePort Canada to break ground next year on a rail park, which the province says will help move rail lines out of Winnipeg.

"For far too long, rail lines have divided our capital city. It is time to move the tracks and open up opportunities for urban renewal," the speech states in part.

"This initiative will create opportunities to build stronger and safer neighbourhoods and communities with less rail traffic. The creation of the CentrePort Canada Rail Park will help us achieve that."

A committee that will include Canadian Pacific Railway and Canadian National officials will produce a detailed study to submit to federal officials, as is required under federal transport legislation, the province said.

Selinger told reporters that there are opportunities to capitalize on a few projects quickly.

"There's a couple of projects on railroad location that I think are within reach within the next few years to get commitments and lock them down — the beach line, up in the North End, and we think there's an opportunity with the Burlington/Northern facility in south Winnipeg to be better hooked up with CentrePort," Selinger said.

Meanwhile, a CentrePort spokesperson told CBC News its project is "not connected to the broader conversation/study around rail relocation."

The spokesperson said it's building a "common-use rail facility" that will allow for multiple railways, including CP, CN and BNSF Railway, to serve businesses in the area, with the goal of bringing more businesses to the area where the inland air, ground and rail port is located.

While the agency spokesperson said they haven't been studying the idea of moving Winnipeg's rail yards to CentrePort, officials will be involved in the committee that will look at the issue.

\$1B partnership with Winnipeg

The New Democrats said their current five-year, \$5.5-billion infrastructure plan, which was introduced two years ago, will be extended past 2020, and another \$4.5 billion will be spent on roads, bridges, flood protection structures and other projects.

"We've already seen the Canadian economy's forecast has been projected to slow down," Selinger said.

"This is not the time to put the brakes on investment and job creation, because it will actually reinforce that downward trend in economic growth, which will make us all worse off."

The throne speech also details a new "enhanced and flexible partnership" with the City of Winnipeg that would provide \$1 billion over five years — which Selinger said is a 25 per cent increase in funding for the city — for roads, public transit, wastewater treatment plants and recreation centres.

The partnership would help replace the Louise Bridge, extend the Chief Peguis Trail west and upgrade Kenaston Boulevard, as well as complete the southwest leg of the rapid transit corridor to the University of Manitoba.

Brandon is also promised new and improved infrastructure, with the throne speech including a school in the city's south end, a redeveloped North Hill Assiniboine Community College campus and expanded Daly overpass.

Rural and northern communities will benefit from a new Growing Communities Fund to build and renew roads, bridges, water and sewer infrastructure and recreation centres.

The throne speech also promised to expand cellphone and broadband service and upgrade highways and roads across the province, including single-access roads into remote communities such as the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation.

12K more child-care spaces

As CBC News reported early Monday, the throne speech promised to create a "universally accessible child-care system with 12,000 additional spaces for families" over the next seven years.

It included a pledge to train more early childhood educators with the help of Red River College, Université de Saint-Boniface and other partners, as well as bring more child-care centres into new housing developments, schools, colleges and universities.

"Every family who needs child care should have access to an affordable space," the throne speech said.

The province also said it will support an "exciting new partnership with the Reh-Fit Centre to build the Pan Am Clinic of the future."

The throne speech also promised paid leave to Manitobans who are victims of domestic violence.

The measure, which appears to be the first of its kind in Canada, would allow abused partners to take time off work to get legal and other counselling. It would also allow them to avoid the daily routine of travelling to and from work, where they could be further victimized.

The NDP government also promised legislative changes to make protection orders stronger and bolstered supports for victims of crime.

Some of the other promises in the throne speech include:

- Teaming up with flood-affected communities to rebuild around Lake Winnipeg and Lake St. Martin, as well as investing in flood protection structures.
- Helping the City of Winnipeg implement a curbside composting program.
- Establishing a breast milk donation centre and bank.
- Expanding the province's 40 per cent tax credit for fertility treatment.
- Introducing legislation to ensure workers have the right to take time off to care for elderly or sick relatives.
- Introducing legislation that would formally recognize customary care, which allows First Nations children seized from the family to remain in their community with another family.
- Equalizing ambulance fees across the province and, where they are high, reducing them.
- Expanding supports for young people with complex mental-health needs and for those struggling with opiate addictions.
- Making Remembrance Day a full statutory holiday.

Opposition parties make pledges

Meanwhile, Selinger is leaving the door open to delaying balancing the books once again and raising taxes if necessary.

"The best laid plans of mice and men change when the circumstances change," Selinger told reporters. "You have to always stay open to that."

The governing NDP plummeted in popular support after it raised the provincial sales tax by one percentage point to fund infrastructure spending in 2013.

In its own "shadow throne speech," the opposition Progressive Conservative Party promised on Friday to roll back the PST to seven per cent — what it was before the increase in 2013 — if elected next spring.

The Tories also pledged to cut hospital wait times, reduce ambulance fees and accelerate the construction of new personal care home beds.

The provincial Liberals have also been touting a number of promises prior to next spring's election, including a proposal to convert student loans into non-refundable grants if elected.

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