Dear Editor,

While our council was expecting a tough provincial budget, nothing prepared us for the significant cuts that were delivered on March 22. While Municipality Name was not one of the 109 hometowns stripped of payments in lieu, we did not come away unscathed.

Hometowns across the province are being scapegoated, forced to pass what amount to provincial tax increases onto our residents through increased property taxes — one of the only levers available for municipalities to pull — while grappling with the ever-expanding list of provincial responsibilities downloaded to the order of government with the least options available to generate revenue.

The provincial municipal revenue sharing agreement dedicates one point of the PST to the province’s municipalities, including Type Municipality Name. This predictable formula meant we prepared a budget already accounting for a hit in funding from the province. And of course we are grateful for municipal revenue sharing, but let us not forget that it was specifically designed to compensate for the provincial interest in the services municipalities deliver. Since 2007, however, the province has shifted more and more items onto the plate of hometowns. This is called downloading and it is gutting the integrity of revenue sharing.

On top of the payments in lieu taken from 109 hometowns, the provincial budget suspended the Community Rink Affordability Program and the Main Street Saskatchewan Program; eliminated STC; further reduced funding to urban parks; and slashed funding to libraries and the Urban Highway Connector Program. The government added insult to injury with the last two. Even the Premier admitted during the bear pit at SUMA Convention in February that the UHCP was a clear case of downloading, and the education minister specifically told libraries they should have gone back to municipalities for more money.

This budget hurts hometowns. We have been told to drain our own rainy day funds after 10 years of being on the front lines of exceptional growth, providing the programs, services, and infrastructure we all rely on every day.

Almost 80 per cent of Saskatchewan’s population lives in our cities, towns, villages, resort villages, and northern municipalities. These hometowns provide core services and infrastructure that are essential to quality of life: safe drinking water; wastewater management; streets and bridges; police and fire services; snow clearing; public transit; recreation, arts, and culture facilities and programming; economic and community development; garbage and recycling collection — the list goes on.

Despite believing we were long-standing **partners** in building our Saskatchewan, hometowns have been left with essentially two options: slash programs and services or hike property taxes.

We were hopeful when SUMA representatives secured a meeting with four cabinet ministers to discuss our concerns days after the budget was released. But our hope that the provincial government was listening and willing to consult were dashed when Government Relations Minister Donna Harpauer made unilateral announcements on the payments in lieu issue on March 31, and then introduced Bill 64 on April 5.

The meeting between Minister Donna Harpauer and others seems to have been nothing more than misdirection and placation, not consultation in good faith. This budget has pitted groups against each other, including the municipal sector. We should all be dismayed at the divisive politicking that has been employed by the government, and enraged by Bill 64’s draconian measures to curtail the democratic right of municipalities to challenge the province’s indefensible expropriation of payments in lieu.

We are calling on the provincial government to stop downloading provincial responsibilities onto hometowns, and reverse the decisions to cut payments in lieu, eliminate STC, and gut our libraries. In short: Stop hurting our hometowns.

Sincerely,

Mayor Name

Municipality