Dear Editor,

While our council was expecting a tough provincial budget, nothing prepared us for the significant cuts that were delivered on March 22.

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.

Then we were blindsided by the decision to cut $36 million of SaskPower and SaskEnergy payments in lieu to 109 urban municipalities. Hometowns were shocked, and many of us now face a fiscal crisis. The elimination of these payments in lieu, which came without consultation, has left many hometowns facing a massive reduction in provincial funding, and nowhere left to cut.

We were hopeful after the mayors of Saskatoon, Regina and Yorkton, and SUMA President Gordon Barnhart secured a meeting with four cabinet ministers to discuss our concerns days after the budget was released. But the promise of further consultation and discussion was broken with a March 31 press release from the government that it would cap the payments in lieu cuts — for nine hometowns, and only at 30 per cent of their revenue sharing amount. Hometowns are still scrambling to find a way to make up for these cuts by the provincial government. INSERT LOCAL EXAMPLE HERE (i.e. In Saskatoon, cutting services to fill the $10.6 million shortfall would eliminate all the city’s leisure programs for a year.)

We were shocked by this surprise announcement, coming less than two days after the provincial government promised to work with us. This unilateral decision to cap the payments in lieu clawback, and the April 5 introduction of Bill 64 (which cancels all municipal services agreements — payments in lieu — and takes away any right to legal action against the government or the Crowns) show a complete lack of respect from this government for the municipalities that spent the last decade providing critical services and creating the quality of life Saskatchewan people count on.

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 played 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, which have been enshrined in contracts for more than 50 years.

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.

Of course hometowns 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 to the plate of hometowns. This is called downloading, and it is gutting the integrity of revenue sharing.

On top of the payments in lieu stolen 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 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