



ALBERTA COUNSEL

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## BUDGET 2026: WINNERS, CUTS, AND THE OIL PRICE WILDCARD

Mackenzie Blyth

### Biggest Winners

In a legislative session defined by a projected \$9.4 billion deficit, Budget 2026 is being promoted as a disciplined plan that's "focused on what matters". Despite deteriorating fiscal conditions, the United Conservative government has opted to increase spending in a select number of politically critical sectors, offering a clear indication of where it intends to focus its message heading toward the scheduled 2027 provincial election.

Health care is at the core of that strategy.

Total provincial health spending is projected to reach \$34.4 billion, with \$13.8 billion dedicated to operating and expanding hospital and surgical systems, representing an increase of roughly \$1.7 billion year over year. The funding is intended to support staffing, emergency services, diagnostics, and surgical capacity while addressing pressures on Alberta's acute-care system.

The government has also increased health care capital spending. Budget 2026 includes \$4.9 billion for health infrastructure, an increase of \$1.3 billion compared with last year. The Red Deer Regional Hospital redevelopment, one of the province's largest health infrastructure projects, will receive more than \$1 billion over three years.

While the government has promised new hospital capacity, including three new inpatient towers in Edmonton and Calgary that could add more than 1,000 beds, Budget 2026 currently includes planning funding rather than construction funding. For example, the Grey Nuns and Misericordia hospital towers in Edmonton will receive \$7.22 million over two years for planning, with construction timelines to be determined in future budgets.

The distinction matters. Planning funds contribute to a project's scope and design, but they do not translate into new beds for patients in the short term. University of Calgary Health Economist Dr. Braden Manns warned that the promised expansions are likely "many years away" from completion, even as hospitals struggle with immediate capacity constraints.

Education is another clear winner in Budget 2026. The province is increasing funding for the Ministry of Education and Childcare by over \$1 billion for 2026-27, including \$10.8 billion in operational funding to put more teachers and Education Assistants in classrooms and ease pressure, and allocating more than \$500 million for capital investments in school facilities.

Together, these investments provide a window into the UCP's priorities as it approaches the next election. Health care, school capacity, and infrastructure expansions in areas where the government can point to concrete action for voters experiencing the effects of rapid population growth.

### On the Chopping Block

While some ministries are receiving substantial increases, others are operating under far tighter fiscal constraints. Budget 2026 reflects a government attempting to address capacity pressures in core services with reductions or delayed investments in other areas.

Several ministries see modest but notable spending reductions, including Energy and Minerals, where an overall decrease of \$133 million reflects a \$180 million reprofiling of capital grants in the Alberta Petrochemical Incentive Program and Carbon Capture and Storage Program.

Arts, Culture, and Status of Women face reductions of \$27 million, with cuts to community and voluntary sector programming. While relatively small within the context of a broader provincial budget, these reductions are politically sensitive given that they affect community organizations and cultural institutions operating across the province.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation is also seeing adjustments, with total operating expenses decreasing by \$21 million in 2026-27. Of note, there is a reduction of \$4 million in rural programming and agricultural societies, a network of rural organizations that play a central role in community events, fairs, and local economic development.

These changes carry political implications.

Agricultural societies are deeply embedded within rural Alberta, areas that form the electoral backbone of the United



## MACKENZIE BLYTH

Associate

Mackenzie Blyth is an Associate, External Relations at Alberta Counsel, where he supports clients through strategic communications, stakeholder engagement, and government relations initiatives. Mackenzie brings extensive experience working within Alberta politics, having worked in communications roles with the United Conservative Government Caucus and as Press Secretary in multiple ministries.

Prior to joining Alberta Counsel, Mackenzie worked as Manager of Strategic Communications for the UCP Government Caucus, overseeing media monitoring, message development, and communications coordination with elected officials. His background includes drafting speeches and communications products, staffing cabinet ministers at events and announcements, and collaborating closely with policy advisors and department staff to deliver accurate messaging on complex and time-sensitive issues.

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Conservative Party. Reductions in support to these organizations will not dominate headlines, but they resonate strongly in local communities that elect UCP MLAs by large majorities and expect government support.

Beyond the political optics, the reductions also reshape the strategic environment for organizations operating in these sectors. In periods of fiscal constraint, ministries become more selective about funding decisions. That makes targeted government relations strategies increasingly important for stakeholders seeking support. Demonstrating alignment with government priorities becomes critical when discretionary spending is limited.

However, for the opposition, these reductions are political opportunities.

NDP leader Naheed Nenshi is likely to focus attention on sectors experiencing cuts to reinforce a broader narrative around government priorities. Community programming, cultural organizations, and agricultural societies provide tangible examples that the opposition can use to argue the UCP is making painful trade-offs while running a large deficit.

In this sense, the ministries facing reductions may be forced into a disproportionately important role in the political debate around the budget, even if their overall spending represents a relatively small portion of provincial expenditures.

### Higher Property Taxes

Budget 2026 also delivers a politically sensitive hit that will show up where many voters will feel it most: property tax bills.

The province is increasing its education property tax requisition to just under \$3.6 billion, up from \$3.1 billion in 2025. Because the requisition is tied to property values, Calgary is forced to shoulder a disproportionately large share as a result of higher property assessments. Provincial officials have pegged the impact at an average increase of about \$340 per Calgary homeowner this year compared to just over \$150 for Edmonton homeowners.

Mayor Jeromy Farkas has framed this hike as “over-taxation” without commensurate services and has gone a step further by floating the idea of a standalone plebiscite asking Calgarians whether the city is getting a “fair deal” from the province. Elections Calgary’s returning officer Kate Martin has estimated a standalone vote could cost around \$12 million, require six months to organize, or be deferred to the 2029 municipal election.

Even if the plebiscite never materializes, the political risk for the UCP remains. A budget designed to focus on schools and health care could be defined locally by the perception that Calgary, the main battlefield of Alberta elections, is paying more than its fair share when affordability is already strained. For the 12 UCP MLAs in Calgary, including eight cabinet ministers and the Speaker, this will mean contentious meetings and correspondence with constituents who didn’t expect a tax increase to come from a conservative government.

### An Unstable WTI

While investments, cuts, and revenue enhancements in Budget 2026 are already generating political debate, the fundamental economic assumptions underpinning the province’s fiscal outlook may prove even more consequential.

Budget 2026 is built around a forecast that West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude will average US\$60.60 per barrel during the 2026-27 fiscal year. That baseline assumption reflects the government’s long-standing approach of using conservative oil projections in its fiscal planning and how it landed at the projected \$9.4 billion deficit.

Yet within days of the Budget 2026 being tabled, global events began to overturn that assumption.

Joint American and Israeli strikes on Iran and retaliatory actions across the region have injected extreme volatility in global energy markets. Concerns about disruptions to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic chokepoint through which roughly one-fifth of the world’s oil supply moves, have caused the WTI to spike.

WTI, which began the year near US\$57 per barrel, quickly surged into the low \$70 range, climbing more than 8 per cent in a single day as markets reacted to the geopolitical shock. **As of the time of writing, the WTI is sitting at US\$98.86.**

For Alberta’s finances, those movements carry significant consequences. The province remains highly sensitive to changes in oil prices because of its reliance on energy royalties. Government estimates suggest every \$1 increase in the price of oil generates roughly \$750 million in additional annual revenue.

Finance Minister Nate Horner has defended the government’s conservative assumptions, arguing that budgets should err on the side of caution rather than rely on optimistic projections. He added that with the current fiscal year ending on March 31, most immediate gains would affect the final weeks of the outgoing fiscal year, potentially reducing the \$4.1-billion deficit projected for 2025-26 rather than the larger deficit forecast for next year.

The long-term trajectory of Budget 2026 may depend less on spending decisions made in Edmonton than on developments unfolding in global energy markets. If geopolitical tensions continue disrupting energy supplies, Alberta could find itself with billions in unexpected revenue and renewed calls to revisit spending reductions included in the budget.



**AILEEN BURKE**  
Director of Nonprofit and  
Voluntary Sector

Aileen is an experienced lobbyist, researcher, facilitator, and communicator. She has been a part of creating and adapting policy and procedure, and complex problem solving. She has significant knowledge of the non-profit industry, with more than 15 years of front-line, management, and volunteer experience in the non-profit sector. Aileen pursued her master's degree in political science from the University of Lethbridge, where her work focused on public policy and systems integration as it relates to the Housing First philosophy. Aileen has put her expertise in political advocacy into action with a run for office at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels.

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## CLIENT SPOTLIGHT

### PASTEW PLACE: SUPPORTING RECOVERY BEFORE, DURING, AND BEYOND TREATMENT

Located in Fort McMurray on Treaty 8 territory, Pastew Place Detox Centre is a vital community resource dedicated to supporting individuals on their journey from addiction to recovery. With a compassionate, structured approach, Pastew Place helps clients navigate some of the most challenging phases of recovery, from early withdrawal through pre-treatment preparation and post-treatment reintegration.

Without stable housing, steady employment, or a supportive network of friends and family, many individuals who leave detox treatment still face uncertainty. Pastew Place's Pre-Treatment Program fills a crucial gap by providing a safe, structured environment for clients as they prepare to enter residential treatment. Working closely with a Client Coordinator, individuals select appropriate treatment centres, confirm transportation and funding for treatment, and participate in activities that build stability and readiness for the next phase of recovery.

Equally important is Pastew Place's Post-Treatment Program, which focuses on the often-overlooked period after residential care. Individuals returning to Fort McMurray are offered transitional housing and comprehensive support while they pursue employment, secure permanent housing, and build a community network. By ensuring continuity of care during this vulnerable phase, Pastew Place helps reduce the risk of relapse and strengthens long-term recovery outcomes for participants.

By providing clients with a pathway to recovery, Pastew Place is supporting a better future in Fort McMurray. Its programs help reduce the social and economic costs associated with substance abuse, including strain on the health care system, impacts on families, and pressure on the justice system. Through education, counselling, and advocacy, Pastew Place is contributing to a safer, more resilient community.

At its heart, Pastew Place is about restoring dignity, rebuilding lives, and strengthening community bonds. Through pre-treatment support that prepares individuals for further care, and post-treatment assistance that helps sustain recovery, Pastew Place truly exemplifies the power of compassionate, community-centered service.



## Our Services

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-  Registration and Logistical Campaign Set-Up
-  Ad Targeting
-  Website Design
-  Ad Reporting/Website Analytics



# POLITICAL EVENTS

## An Evening with Mike Ellis

Tues, March 24 – 7–9pm

Location: River Cree Resort and Casino, Enoch

- The Calgary-West UCP Association will host an evening reception with MLA Mike Ellis and party supporters.
- The fundraising event provides an opportunity to connect with Ellis and discuss provincial priorities while supporting the United Conservative Party.

## Politics & Prosecco in Edmonton

Mon, March 30 – 5:30–7:30pm

Location: Royal Mayfair Golf Club, Edmonton

- Premier Danielle Smith, along with MLA Rebecca Schulz and Minister Tanya Fir, will host the Edmonton edition of the party's annual Politics & Prosecco event celebrating women in politics.
- The evening will provide networking opportunities with party leadership and supporters, with proceeds supporting the United Conservative Party of Alberta.

## Economic Policy Dialogue: A Breakfast with NDP Leader Naheed Nenshi

Thurs, April 2 – 9–11am

Location: TBD

- The Edmonton Chamber of Commerce will host Alberta NDP Leader Naheed Nenshi for a keynote and discussion on economic policy and Alberta's business climate.
- The event will include a fireside chat with Nenshi alongside Shadow Ministers Rhiannon Hoyle (Jobs, Economy and Trade) and Court Ellingson (Finance), focusing on workforce development, economic diversification, and investment attraction.

## BOMA Leaders Luncheon featuring Mayor Andrew Knack

Thurs, April 16 – 11:30am–1:30pm

Location: JW Marriott Edmonton ICE District

- BOMA Edmonton will host Edmonton Mayor Andrew Knack for a luncheon discussion with leaders from the commercial real estate sector.
- The conversation will focus on municipal priorities including economic growth, downtown revitalization, infrastructure, and policies shaping Edmonton's future development.



**STEPHEN BLANCHETTE**  
Associate

Stephen Blanchette brings a results-driven background in real estate, public policy, and strategic communications to his role as an Associate Lobbyist with AB Counsel. He spent five years in the real estate sector as a valuation and property tax consultant, progressing from appraisal work to senior consulting roles. In 2025, Stephen transitioned into politics full-time, first managing a federal election campaign and later supporting an Indigenous self-government in the Northwest Territories, where he contributed to executive operations and communications strategy.

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## KEY INFLUENCER PROFILE

### DAVID DIAMOND

INTERIM CEO, ACUTE CARE ALBERTA

Mackenzie Blyth

David Diamond currently serves as Interim Chief Operating Officer of Acute Care Alberta, one of the province's new health corporations that became fully operational on September 1, 2025. Acute Care Alberta is responsible for overseeing hospital services, emergency departments, surgeries, urgent care centres, and EMS coordination across the province. Appointed Interim Chief Operating Officer on February 20, 2025, and now leading the corporation as Interim CEO, Diamond is responsible for guiding the

operational implementation of Alberta's refocused health care system.

Diamond brings more than three decades of health system leadership experience from across Canada. Most recently, he served as President and CEO of Eastern Health beginning in 2014 and later as CEO of the newly consolidated Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services, where he led the province's transition to a single provincial health authority. Upon his retirement in 2024, Newfoundland's Premier credited Diamond for helping create a "solid foundation" for continued health transformation and being instrumental in the province's system redesign efforts.

His connection to Alberta is longstanding. Diamond previously held leadership roles with Capital Health and Alberta Health Services during the province's earlier transition to a unified health authority. He has cited that experience as formative in shaping his focus on execution, organizational alignment, and frontline resilience during periods of structural change.

Throughout his career, Diamond has emphasized that successful reform depends less on design and more on disciplined implementation. With an operationally grounded approach to leadership, he places strong emphasis on engaging frontline teams and maintaining system stability amid transformation.

With the launch of new refocused health corporations, including Acute Care Alberta, Primary Care Alberta, Assisted Living Alberta, and Recovery Alberta, Diamond's leadership will play a critical role in determining if restructuring delivers tangible improvements for Albertans.

## AT A GLANCE

### In the Media

#### **Continued Investments in Acute Care**

The province announced that it will invest \$13.8 billion in 2026-27 to strengthen hospital and surgical services as part of Budget 2026. This represents a \$1.7 billion increase from the previous year. The funding aims to expand hospital-based services and help reduce wait times for surgeries, cancer treatment, emergency care, and diagnostic services.

Minister of Hospital and Surgical Health Services, Matt Jones, stated: "Budget 2026 takes decisive action to relieve pressures on Alberta's health care system, providing health professionals with the resources and infrastructure needed to deliver timely, high-quality care for all Albertans."

#### **Province Announces New Strategic Procurement Office**

The Government of Alberta has created a Strategic Procurement Office to enhance procurement practices across all ministries. Its mandate includes strengthening procurement oversight, delivering consistent training, and supporting faster, more transparent decision-making. The Strategic Procurement Office is scheduled to be fully operational by April 1, 2026.

Deputy Minister of Executive Council, Dale McFee, stated: "The Strategic Procurement Office will strengthen how government delivers results for Albertans by enabling faster decision-making and helping ensure programs and services are delivered efficiently. By modernizing procurement and supporting public servants with clear oversight, this office reinforces our responsibility as stewards of public funds."

#### **Incentive Program to Boost Critical Minerals Sector**

The Government of Alberta is developing a new incentive program to attract investment and support growth in the province's critical minerals sector, responding to rising global demand. Announced by Minister Brian Jean, the program is planned for launch in 2027 and is a key element of Alberta's broader Minerals Strategy and Action Plan. It aims to unlock Alberta's mineral potential and create jobs.

"Minerals are essential to our economic future, energy security and global competitiveness. Alberta has an important role to play as a leading North American processor and refiner of critical minerals. These incentives will attract the needed jobs and investment to meet this demand," commented Minister of Energy and Minerals, Brian Jean.

#### **Funding for Environmental Reclamation**

The province announced a \$46 million investment to develop new technologies aimed at reducing oilsands tailings ponds and improving environmental reclamation. Funded through the Technology Innovation and Emissions Reduction (TIER) program and delivered by Emissions Reduction Alberta, the initiative will support nine projects led by major oil companies, businesses, and a post-secondary institution.

"The world is looking for responsibly produced energy, and Alberta is delivering. With industry leadership and TIER investment, we're deploying technologies that clean up mine water, protect land and water, and deliver the jobs and competitiveness Alberta needs," commented Minister of Environment and Protected Areas, Grant Hunter.



**PASCAL RYFFEL**  
VP of Corporate  
Development and  
Government Relations

After completing his MA in Media and International Development, Pascal spent four years with the Alberta NDP Caucus. Pascal has been directly involved in Alberta politics for almost two decades, including as a candidate in 2008, and has a deep and current knowledge of Alberta politics. Pascal has been with Alberta Counsel since 2015.

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**JACK DERBICH**  
Associate

Jack Derbich brings a unique range of experience to the Alberta Counsel government relations team. While serving as Legislative Coordinator from 2022 to 2023, he supported elected officials on key files such as rural health and EMS reform. In addition, Jack has served as a commissioned officer in the Canadian Army Reserve since 2020, bringing with him a planning based results-oriented approach. In 2025 he graduated with distinction from the University of Alberta, earning a double major in Political Science and History, with an additional Certificate in Civil-Military Leadership.

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# BUDGET 2026, BILL 15, AND LAUNCHING THE ALBERTA SHERIFF'S POLICE SERVICE

Jack Derbich

The provincial budget sets the tone for government priorities in the year ahead, and Budget 2026 is no exception. Among the various budget lines was a significant allocation toward a long-embattled priority of Premier Danielle Smith: the establishment of a provincial police force. In light of recently tabled legislation, the Alberta Sheriff's Police Service (ASPS) is now close to becoming operational. Structured as an independent Crown corporation since July 2025, the ASPS has been the focus of a series of legislative changes and, as of Budget 2026, additional operating funding to advance the service toward full implementation.

Legislatively, the ASPS is a matter of weeks away from becoming a functioning police service, pending the anticipated passage of Bill 15, the Public Safety and Emergency Services Statutes Amendment Act, 2026. As of March 9, the bill sits in Committee of the Whole. If passed, Bill 15 would implement the framework required for the ASPS to become operational. Provisions of Bill 15 include transfer opportunities for all 1,200 currently serving Sheriff's personnel into policing positions contingent on training and qualification requirements.

It should be noted that prior legislative groundwork was laid for the future of the ASPS during the Fall 2025 session with the passage of Bill 4, the Public Safety and Emergency Services Statutes Amendment Act, 2025 No. 2, on November 26, 2025. Bill 4 permitted the formation of a new collective bargaining organization for future ASPS officers in line with the Police Officers Collective Bargaining Act.

Budget 2026 complemented the legislative advances of the ASPS by providing substantial funding for the practical work now required to establish a new police service. Managed under the Public Safety and Emergency Services Portfolio, the ASPS was allocated a total operating budget of \$200.9 million in Budget 2026, with approximately \$36.9 million earmarked for the implementation of Bill 15. Additionally, Budget 2026 forecasts that a total of \$644.7 million will be spent on the service by 2029, with average operating budget increases of \$15 million year over year.

Although the budget for the ASPS is not itemized in detail, it can be assumed that the costs the service will incur include expansion of operational capabilities such as vehicles, stations, and equipment, as well as ancillary functions such as training, oversight, and administration.

Among the accountability considerations for the establishment of the ASPS is the requirement for an oversight and complaints capacity. Notably, the official launch of the Police Review Commission (PRC) on December 1 of last year answered this need. For the PRC, Budget 2026 provides a jump in operational funding from approximately \$21.5 million to just over \$26 million, a level that is anticipated to remain over the next two years. As the ASPS moves toward becoming operational, the presence of a robust oversight body may provide the legitimacy needed to counter complaints surrounding the creation of the force.

Overall, recent legislative activity and the allocations contained in Budget 2026 highlight the importance the current government places on establishing the ASPS. Significant budgetary commitments of more than \$644 million over the next three years, in tandem with numerous legislative amendments, indicate a sustained effort to build the institutional framework required for a provincial police service. Although the final passage of Bill 15 remains a necessary step before the ASPS can formally begin operations, the long-term success of the service is now likely to depend on its ability to develop operational capacity, recruit and train personnel, and demonstrate public credibility as a new policing institution within Alberta.

