

**Honourable Lori Sigurdson
Minister of Seniors and Housing**

AUMA Mayors' Caucus

**March 10, 2016
1:30 p.m. – 2:15 p.m.**

Matrix Hotel, 10640-100th Avenue, Edmonton

Keynote speech

I am thankful for the opportunity to participate in the Mayors' Caucus, and to have a conversation with you about seniors and housing. Municipalities are significant stakeholders and partners to the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. We both strive to serve seniors and Albertans who need an affordable place to live. Today is an opportunity for me to share some of the work my Ministry is doing, and hear your ideas and concerns.

I am honoured by my recent appointment as Minister of Seniors and Housing. My new role fits well with my background in social work and community supports. Over my career, I have been involved with several organizations that support seniors and vulnerable Albertans.

I'm proud that Premier Notley has renamed the Ministry to Seniors and Housing. The name more accurately reflects the work of the Ministry, and affirms this government's commitment to housing for seniors and those in need. The new name also makes the Ministry's role clearer to Albertans that Seniors and Housing provides a wide range of supports – from seniors benefit programs to safe, affordable housing.

I'd like to start by thanking each of you for your work to support seniors in your communities and for your ongoing collaboration with the Alberta government on seniors program delivery. Recently, I had the pleasure of launching an alternate transportation toolkit which helps communities build transportation programs for seniors.

As you know, many seniors do not drive – either because they are no longer able to, don't want to, or don't have a personal vehicle. It's especially challenging for seniors in smaller communities that don't have public transit or other convenient alternatives. Being able to get around and run errands, go to medical appointments, or visit friends and family helps seniors be healthy, active, and connected to their community. Not having access to transportation can be isolating and reduces independence and quality of life.

The toolkit was developed to help communities bridge this gap, and develop transportation options to help seniors lead more active lives. I understand the toolkit was promoted – and well-received – at an AUMA conference last fall. It was also promoted through the Ministry's Grey Matters conference and through the AAMDC Convention.

Additionally, part of the toolkit's development involved a pilot project with the Wainwright and District Handivan Society. The Wainwright pilot is a true success story with service growing from 20 trips per month to 150 per month in less than three years. It was heartwarming to hear how the service changed the lives of seniors in Wainwright and is helping them live full, independent lives.

I am confident the transportation toolkit will help produce similar success in many communities and I encourage you to download a copy from the Ministry's website and see what may be possible in your community. The development of the toolkit is an excellent example of how communities, government, and other stakeholders can work together to find solutions.

Aging in community and age-friendly communities are themes that are active in Alberta today. Our seniors population is growing and with that growth comes a need to ensure the right supports are in place. Two of my Ministry's key programs – the Alberta Seniors Benefit and Special Needs Assistance Program – help support aging in community.

Alberta Seniors Benefit supplements a senior's income from the federal government to improve their ability to support themselves. The Special Needs Assistance program provides funding support for low-income seniors who need to replace a furnace or a fridge or a stove. These may seem like small tokens, but in reality can have a significant impact on a senior's life – and help keep them in their own homes for longer.

Age-Friendly initiatives likewise find ways to make communities more accessible for our aging population. Many of you are already implementing age-friendly principles into your community planning. Age-friendly means a better community to live for everyone a community that provides the services and programs that help people to age and remain active and independent. Government has recognized several communities across Alberta for their work in this area and I look forward to learning more about the initiatives underway in other communities.

Another program with communities and municipalities is in the realm of elder abuse awareness. I know there is excellent work going on across Alberta to assist coordination and collaboration among service providers to help communities respond to elder abuse and train front-line staff. My Ministry has a \$3 million grant program in place to support this work. This year's grant proposals have been received and I'm looking forward to announcing the successful projects in the near future.

Another area where we have support from Alberta municipalities is the promotion of the Property Tax Deferral Program – a program that's familiar to many of you. Through the program, senior homeowners can defer all or part of their property taxes through a low-interest home equity loan with the Alberta government. The province pays the property taxes on behalf of the senior, who then repays the loan when the home is sold – or sooner, if the senior prefers.

The program provides financial flexibility for seniors by freeing up funds each month, and aims to help seniors remain in their own homes for longer. Many municipalities include information on the program in property tax notifications that are mailed out each year. This is valuable promotional support that we appreciate – and hope all municipalities consider doing. Although the program is voluntary, it is a beneficial program that could be accessed by many more senior homeowners. I encourage you all to continue promoting the program to your senior ratepayers, and I thank you for your help.

As you know, seniors lodges play an integral role in the fabric of Alberta communities. The AUMA has long been a supporter of Alberta's seniors lodge program and the continued partnership between government and municipalities has been a significant contributor to the success of the program.

I'm pleased to update you on the ongoing seniors lodge renewal projects across the province. The majority of Alberta's seniors lodges are showing their age and they need to be repaired and modernized. In some cases, full replacement is needed. This work is necessary to ensure seniors can continue to live in safe, affordable homes in their communities.

To that end, the Government of Alberta, together with the federal government, is investing nearly \$400 million for 38 projects throughout Alberta. Projects are already underway in many communities and more groundbreakings are expected this year. The investment will result in 1,200 refurbished units and 900 new units for low and moderate-income seniors. Units will be

brought up to modern lodge standards, meaning residents will enjoy larger rooms with full in-suite washrooms.

In some of the older lodges, elderly residents still have to go down the hallway to bathe or take a shower. I think most of us find this unacceptable, which is why the investments in lodges are important.

Modern standards also mean lodges will have more double rooms for couples. They'll also have modern fire suppression and safety systems. Work is also underway to install fire sprinklers and other safety upgrades in more than 100 lodges and continuing care facilities. These facilities were built before 1990, when sprinklers became mandatory under Alberta's building codes. Work is expected to be completed by 2018. All of this renewal and upgrading is made possible through municipal partnerships and I am thankful for the ongoing support from AUMA members to see this work to completion.

Before I talk about affordable housing, I want to address grants in place of taxes for government-owned and supported housing properties. I know this issue is significant for you. As you are aware, the previous government announced plans to cancel grants in place of taxes. This has had an impact on municipalities. As you know, the unprecedented collapse in the price of oil is creating significant challenges for our province's finances. That means more than ever, we need to be making careful, fiscally responsible choices with taxpayers' dollars.

The reality is that we can't afford to restore every cut made by the previous government. With our budget constraints, restoring these grants would have also meant reducing funding for tenant supports and property maintenance. It was a matter of choosing the option that least affected low-income Albertans who rely on government housing support.

I know that some of you have inquired about whether grants in place of taxes could still be restored. I am going to be straightforward with you. I do not anticipate the grants being restored in the near future, given our continuing fiscal situation and budgetary pressures. Maintaining programs and services for the most vulnerable Albertans remains our priority.

The elimination of grants in place of taxes was greatly influenced by the many challenges faced in Alberta's affordable housing system in particular, challenges with the long-term sustainability of the system itself. Unfortunately, we have inherited about \$1 billion in deferred maintenance costs on the housing that already exists. When the units that already exist need maintenance and renovations just to stay functional, this makes it even more challenging to build new units.

I'm sure you have all read or watched the news stories regarding deteriorating conditions of government-owned or supported housing. Like the lodges, much of this housing was built more than 30 years ago and is in urgent need of repairs and upgrading. While new builds are also needed, upgrading Alberta's existing housing will help get more people into affordable housing sooner.

We are currently working through the planning process for Budget 2016. It is a process that requires finding a balance between controlling costs during this challenging economic time and investing in the supports that Albertans count on. When the budget is announced in a few weeks, I look forward to being able to share more details about how we are tackling the challenges faced in our affordable housing system and investing in new housing going forward.

Despite the many challenges we face, I remain optimistic about our ability to improve the system where needed, and to build on the programs that have been successful. I had the pleasure of touring a seniors' lodge and a community housing complex a couple of weeks ago. It was an opportunity to hear directly from front-line staff who operate our affordable housing facilities. I can tell you that I received quite an education that day about some of the challenges they face. And I intend to incorporate what I learned into the work underway to improve Alberta's affordable housing system.

Right now, we have an opportunity to look at how we deliver affordable housing through the renewal of regulations under the Alberta Housing Act. Five of the Act's regulations will expire in about a year, giving us a window to explore options. We can update regulations and develop more flexible and efficient housing policies and programs. This is an exciting opportunity to make positive changes – and I encourage you all to stay tuned. I anticipate there will be a role for municipalities and other housing partners as we explore options.

We are also hopeful that the new federal government will honour its commitment to invest in social infrastructure, which includes affordable housing. My predecessor, Minister Hoffman, had a productive meeting earlier this year with federal infrastructure minister Amarjeet Sohi. From his previous work on Edmonton City Council, Minister Sohi is familiar with the housing situation, both in Edmonton and Alberta as a whole. I look forward to working with him and I am confident federal dollars will find their way toward affordable housing in Alberta.

Given the tough fiscal times we're in and the challenges we face, I want to thank you for your ongoing support and partnership. I am optimistic about the future – and the positive work we can accomplish together. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the mayors' caucus.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.