

# Saskatoon voters head to the polls

BY DAVID HUTTON, THE STARPHOENIX OCTOBER 28, 2009 3:13 AM

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"Election day, in a lot of ways, it's kind of like you're an event planner and say you're planning a wedding and everyone is in place and everyone has their jobs to do," said city clerk Janice Mann, who has been in charge of organizing much of the election.

"In many ways election day can be anti-climatic for me personally. If I've done my job right, everything should be in place."

Mann said this election has stretched her staff more than any other, a product perhaps of Saskatoon beginning to experience big-city issues like never before.

For the first time since at least the early 1970s, each member of city council and the mayor is seeking re-election.

Of the total 28 elected positions, three council and three public school board spots have been acclaimed.

A few ward races, though, are particularly compelling. Incumbent Darren Hill is attempting to hold his ground in Ward 1 against Carol Reynolds.

In Ward 4, Myles Heidt is seeking his sixth term against his strongest challenger yet in University of Saskatchewan researcher Sean Shaw. In Ward 3, Maurice Neault is up against teacher Derek Rope.

Ward 10 incumbent Bev Dubois faces multiple challengers in U of- data administrator Mark Horseman and engineer Dave Ford.

Ward 8 veteran Glen Penner and Ward 2 incumbent Pat Lorje each face more than one challenger.

The mayoral race, mainly fought between Lenore Swystun and incumbent Don Atchison, has brought forward salient issues of infrastructure development, transparency, financial management and south downtown development, said University of Saskatchewan Prof. Joe Garcea.

The leading candidates have come down on opposing sides of several issues, including funding a city-run blue box recycling program, creating a taxi commission and moving the Mendel Art Gallery to River Landing.

"(The mayor's race) has served an important role in terms of transparency and public accountability," Garcea said.

"Those are notable issues."

Garcea termed it a "ritualistic" and "low key" campaign where as much attention has been paid to issues of voter turnout as anything else.

"People have gone through the motions of an election but really haven't been able to excite or energize the electorate," he said.

Of more than 218,000 city residents, 170,272 are eligible to vote. More than 5,600 people voted at advance polls, putting voter turnout at more than three per cent already.

It all adds up to an election in which each vote carries significance, especially when Saskatoon is going head to head with another city on voter turnout, said Don Ravis, a member of LEAD Saskatoon, the local group that challenged Regina to see which centre attracts the most voters.

"You can't make people go to vote but you can raise the awareness that it is election day and they should be taking a look at who the candidates are," he said Tuesday.

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## Casting ballot only way to set course for city

THE STARPHOENIX OCTOBER 28, 2009 3:13 AM

Whether it's because Saskatoon's capital and operating budgets have been swelling at an even faster pace than the city's population, or it's how City Hall handles environmental issues, fixes the roads or removes snow, there are lots of reasons to get out to vote today.

Not for the first time in history, our city has been growing rapidly. Civic officials estimate more than 209,000 people called Saskatoon home by the end of last year, compared with the 154,000 who lived here at the beginning of the last major population explosion of 1981.

Managing that growth has been a major challenge. Councillors over the years have tried to control budgets, sometime by instituting arbitrary tax freezes, reducing reserve funds to dangerous levels or overestimating revenue from civic utilities, hoping they'd grow to cover spending increases.

The city council you are being asked to elect today will have to address many of these issues -- particularly since Saskatoon is likely to keep growing. That will require more extensive (and expensive) infrastructure, and a struggle to maintain and enhance what is arguably one of the highest qualities of life in the country.

Unquestionably, the councillors elected today will have to hit the ground running, beginning early next month with meetings that can be expected to be long and gruelling. They have to deal with a backlog brought about because council hasn't met since September.

And the issues it will be dealing with are significant and complex. For example, Saskatoon must enhance its strategy to attract immigrants if it hopes to continue to be the engine of Saskatchewan's economic growth. In a country that's increasingly identified by its immigrant population, only five per cent of Saskatchewan residents are immigrants, compared to 12 per cent in Manitoba, 15 per cent in Alberta and 27 per cent in Ontario.

Among the other challenges and opportunities the new council will have to address is the continuing growth of the city's aboriginal population relative to its non-aboriginal. Now about 15 per cent of the city is of aboriginal heritage and, because this demographic tends to be younger and have more children, it is expected to continue to grow disproportionately.

While it is true Natives have historically rarely participated in any great numbers when it comes to local governments, preferring instead to deal with their own institutions and the federal government, those walls seem to be breaking down and this new council will be challenged to more aggressively reach out to aboriginal constituents.

Over the last number of years Saskatoon has had to deal increasingly with two seemingly contradictory trends. One is urbanization, which sees people migrating to the city from rural areas, with the other being the seeming desire of Saskatchewan people to remain close to the city but outside its borders. This has meant that the population of Saskatoon's outlying communities has grown at a faster rate, for example elevating Martensville to the status of a city this year.

But the latter trend comes with challenges, including a need to encourage greater population density within the city's borders and the infrastructure challenge of bringing those bedroom community dwellers to their jobs based in Saskatoon.

Perhaps even greater a challenge for the new council will be to help stem a trend that has plagued Canada and perplexed sociologists for the last two decades -- the decline in public community engagement that manifests itself in such things as low voter turnout and decreased volunteerism.

For many years Saskatoon has focused its efforts increasingly on creating a strong cultural economy. This doesn't run counter to its desire to be known as "Science City," but has been a parallel effort to enhance the quality of life in the city and enhance its national reputation.

None of this is to understate the challenges of coping with rapidly growing budgets and a swelling bureaucracy as an expanding Saskatoon gains in economic and political influence. Saskatoon already swings above its weight class in many national discussions, from environmental policy to managing its employees. As Saskatchewan's economy continues to grow, it will have to accept a greater role on the nation's stage.

If all this isn't enough to convince you to get out and vote, then we rely on the last two stalwart arguments: Without voting, one squanders a chance to claim one's most basic democratic right; and it's the best way to ensure one can look a neighbour in the eye and say, "I did my duty."

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## Polls open at 8 a.m. across city

Polls open at 8 a.m. for the election of a mayor, 10 city councillors, 10 public school board trustees and seven Catholic school board trustees.

Election staff poised at the 59 polling stations will shut down voting at 8 p.m. to allow counting to begin.

Preliminary results will begin to filter out minutes later on the city's website.

Only residents 18 years or older who have lived in the city for three months and in the province for six months are allowed to vote. Post-secondary students who lived in the city this year, left for the summer, and then returned for the fall are also eligible.

More than 500 people will be working on behalf of the City of Saskatoon to ensure the voting process goes smoothly.

To encourage voter turnout, the city is also trying to make the voting process as convenient as possible.

There are no excuses not to vote, city clerk Janice Mann posted on her Twitter page.

Workers operating the mobile polls will also travel to dozens of homes so people who can't get to the polls for physical reasons can vote.

Visually impaired candidates can use a special AUTOMark voting system at the downtown public library.

Voters can also take advantage of free bus rides to polls on the regular transit system's normal routes.

Complimentary tickets were distributed to each home and apartment in Saskatoon as part of the civic election voters guide.

More information is available on the city's website at [www.saskatoon.ca](http://www.saskatoon.ca)

Polling stations are located at:

Ward 1

Sutherland School, 1008 Egbert Ave.

St. Paul School, 1527 Alexandra Ave.

St. Michael School\*, 22-33rd St. East

First Mennonite Church, 418 Queen St.

Saskatoon Public Library, 311-23rd St. East

Ward 2

Caswell School, 204 30th St. East

Princess Alexandra School, 210 Ave. H South

St. George Senior Citizens' Centre, 1235 20th St. West

W.P. Bate School, 2515 18th St. West

St. Dominic School, 3301 Dieppe St.

St. John School, 1205 Ave.- South

King George School, 721 Ave. K South

Ward 3

Fairhaven School, 495 Forrester Rd.

St. Marguerite School, 1235 McCormack Rd.

Father Vachon School, 3722 Centennial Dr.

Bishop Roberecki School, 34 Pearson Pl.

Ward 4

Westmount School, 411 Ave. J North

Howard Coad School, 431 Ave. T North

Henry Kelsey School, 16 Valens Dr.

Bishop Klein School, 1121 Northumberland Ave.

Dundonald School, 162 Wedge Rd.

Caroline Robins School, 1410 Byers Cres.

Ward 5

River Heights School, 60 Ravine Dr.

Rusty McDonald Library Auditorium, 225 Primrose Dr.

Lawson Heights School, 430 Redberry Rd.

Silverwood Heights School, 403 Silverwood Rd.

St. Angela School, 302 Russell Rd.

Brownell School, 247 Russell Rd.

Ward 6

Oskayak High School, 919 Broadway Ave.

Cosmopolitan Senior Citizens Centre, 614 11th St. East

Brunskill School, 101 Wiggins Ave.

Bishop Murray High School, 615 Wiggins Ave.

Holliston School, 1511 Louise Ave.

Ecole Canadienne-Francaise de Saskatoon, 1407 Albert Ave.

Buena Vista School, 1306 Lorne Ave.

Ward 7

Queen Elizabeth School, 1905 Eastlake Ave.

Seventh Day Adventist Christian School, 2228 Herman Ave.

John Lake School, 2606 Broadway Ave.

Hugh Cairns School, 2621 Cairns Ave.

Pope John Paul II School, 3035 Arlington Ave.

Prince Philip School, 1715 Drinkle St.

Alvin Buckwold School, 715 East Dr.

Holy Cross High School, 2115 McEown Ave.

Ward 8

St. Matthew School, 1508 Arlington Ave.

Greystone Heights School, 2721 Main St.

College Park School, 3440 Harrington St.

St. Augustine School, 602 Boychuk Dr.

Lakewood Civic Centre, 1635 McKercher Dr.

Ward 9

Wildwood School\*, 203 Rosedale Blvd.

Bishop Pocock School, 227 Avondale Rd.

Lakeview School, 527 Kingsmere Blvd.

St. Bernard School, 203 Whiteshore Cres.

Lakeridge School, 305 Waterbury Rd.

St. Luke School, 275 Emmeline Rd.

Ward 10

Forest Grove School, 501 115th St. East

Father Robinson School, 530 Rogers Rd.

Alice Turner Library, 110 Nelson Rd.

Dr. John G. Egnatoff School, 225 Kenderdine Rd.

Ebenezer Baptist Church, 107 McWillie Ave.

\* Indicates access may be difficult for some people.

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## Finances a central concern

BY JEREMY WARREN, THE STARPHOENIX OCTOBER 27, 2009

On the doorsteps of Saskatoon, voters are telling city council candidates they're concerned about how taxes and spending on expensive projects are affecting the city.

It's become one of the central election issues. At ward forums across the city, candidates have had to answer questions about growing budgets and shrinking reserves.

Several candidates -- mostly those challenging incumbents -- have said the No. 1 issue on the doorstep is taxes and spending.

Two mayoral candidates, incumbent Don Atchison and challenger Lenore Swystun, sparred Friday over the city's books, sending out duelling press releases.

Swystun has tried to portray Atchison as a big spender focused on legacy projects, while Atchison has defended the spending as a necessary fix to a huge infrastructure deficit.

But a former city finance director says the numbers might simply indicate a city in transition, one that once maintained slow growth and is now using its economic momentum to fix outstanding problems.

The financial shifts aren't abnormal and fit somewhere in the middle when compared to other western Canadian cities, said Ken Pontikes, a sessional lecturer with the University of Saskatchewan political studies department and a former director of finances for Saskatoon from 1984 to 1988.

The fact is, Saskatoon has more debt than ever and is paying more in 2009 to cover interest on loans than it did in 2006 and 2003, the last two election years.

Since 2003, tax hikes surpassed inflation in Saskatoon in every year except election years. The revenue stabilization fund -- the city's rainy day fund -- is empty after hovering around \$4 million in recent years.

"What we're seeing now is a big change in finances affected not only by the growth of the city but by funding made available from other levels of government," said Pontikes.

Ottawa has been generous with funds for municipalities in the past several years and the city is essentially grabbing the money it can before the grants disappear.

Grants from provincial and federal governments have increased steadily since 2004, rising to \$63.9 million in 2008 from \$18.9 million.

"We have an infrastructure deficit and we have undersized infrastructure and a lot of pent-up projects that should have been done a while ago and now the funding is available and the city is moving ahead," said Pontikes.

The city takes out loans to help fund its share of the projects, but in the long run -- once the sports complexes, the new bridge or art gallery are opened -- the annual operating costs will escalate.

"With capital funding, it's in and out because the federal government gives money to build a project, but then does not support it in terms of operating expenses," said Pontikes.

"That's where, in the end, a municipality has to be careful about chasing all these dollars . . . not only about their share of capital cost but because if they don't have money in reserve, a municipality will borrow more."

The city's \$241.7-million capital budget in 2009 is the largest ever, including \$17.7 million in loans, up from a total of \$68.7 million in 2003.

The 2009 operating budget totalled \$280 million, which is about \$20.5 million more than in 2008 and up from \$182.5 million in 2003.

Debt held by the city hit \$115.3 million so far in 2009, up from \$42.7 million in 2006 and \$29.9 million in 2003.

The city will spend almost \$11 million this year to service its debt, an increase from about \$4 million in 2003.

"We've always had a low debt ratio in Saskatoon and it still puts us in good company compared to other municipalities," said Pontikes. "Our debt rates are going up, but they're not unreasonable."

When the mill rate increase passes the rate of inflation, people on fixed incomes are hit hardest, but others might feel increases in city services or capital projects justify a tax hike, said Pontikes.

But the Frontier Centre for Public Policy released a report Friday on government transparency in Saskatoon and Regina and found Saskatoon doesn't properly measure performance, such as when the city increases snow removal.

The problem stems from the city failing to regularly link the measurements to spending, said the report.

"All municipal government performance measurements should be linked to expenditure, as residents need to know if they are getting value for money," said the report.

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#### - CITY FINANCES

Year Total debt As % of budget\*

2009 \$115.3 million 41.17%

2006 \$42.7 million 19.99%

2003 \$29.9 million 16.38%

Year Total debt As % of

service charges budget\*

2009 \$10.97 million 3.92%

2006 \$4.95 million 2.32%

2003 3.94 million 2.16%

Year Tax increase CPI\*\*

2009 2.87% 3.87%

2008 5.44% 3.46%

2007 4.76% 2.13%

2006 1.86% 2.31%

2005 4.00% 2.09%

2004 3.78% 2.17%

2003 2.86% 2.87%

\* As percentage of operating budget (not including utility expenditures)

\*\* Consumer Price Index

Source: City of Saskatoon

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## Swystun backs taxi commission

BY DAVID HUTTON, THE STARPHOENIX OCTOBER 27, 2009

Mayoralty candidates at a forum Monday night traded different fixes to a taxi industry that's widely seen as broken down.

"This industry is an exceedingly complex industry," Don Atchison, the incumbent, told a crowd of roughly 50 people at the Cosmo Civic Centre.

Atchison said a \$50,000 comprehensive study of the industry that will get underway soon will help clear up the industry's woes.

The successful consulting firm is expected to gather input from citizens, drivers, taxi licence holders, the two local school boards and the airport authority, a city report in August said.

Lenore Swystun, a mayoralty candidate and former councillor, shot back that it's "time for action," calling for a taxi commission to oversee the industry and stating she would advocate for an open stand at the airport.

"That is not fair what happened at the airport," Swystun said. "The cab industry should be open and free."

Atchison said a taxi commission would be costly for taxpayers or the industry.

"Somebody's got to pay for it," he said. "Either taxpayers are going to pay for it or the industry is going to pay for it."

United Blueline was awarded in August the 10-year contract to serve the airport, a move that came under fire since the company lost a large part of its taxi fleet just weeks before.

Atchison said the airport authority has ultimate control over the contract, not city council. He took issue with Swystun after she said she would fight to open up the airport to other companies, saying there is a contract there that needs to be honoured.

"People can make all the promises they want if they don't have to deliver," he said.

Swystun said it's the job of council to seek solutions in the city where there are problems.

"You bet we can change things," she said.

Roger Chernoff, the only other mayoral candidate in attendance, said the industry should try to remove itself from government control.

"It's all about government control," he said. "The government wants control over everything."

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## Ask the candidates

THE STARPHOENIX OCTOBER 27, 2009

It's alternately the easiest and the hardest question for a candidate to answer: Will you commit to keeping taxes at or below the rate of inflation for three years?

The StarPhoenix asked every mayoral and council candidate this question. Some were quick to answer "Yes," while a few -- mostly incumbents -- refused to answer because they felt the issue was too complex and doesn't allow for unknowns. Others ultimately answered in the affirmative with resignation after criticizing the question and declaring their commitment as more of a target.

### Mayoral candidates

- Don Atchison -- Refused answer
- Roger Chernoff -- Yes
- Steve Lawrance -- Refused answer
- Johnny Melenchuk -- Unable to contact

- Lenore Swystun -- Yes

#### Ward 1

- Darren Hill -- Yes

- Carol Reynolds -- Yes

#### Ward 2

- Doreen Day-Wapass -- Yes

- Robert Godfrey -- Yes

- Vincent Hilbert -- Yes

- Pat Lorje -- Refused answer

- Elmer Scheltgen -- Yes

#### Ward 3

- Maurice Neault -- Yes

- Derek Rope -- Yes

#### Ward 4

- Myles Heidt -- Yes

- Sean Shaw -- Refused answer

#### Ward 5

- Tracy Westgard -- Yes

- Gordon Wyant -- Yes

#### Ward 6

- Charlie Clark -- Refused answer

Ward 7

- Bob Pringle -- Refused answer

Ward 8

- Martin Been -- Yes
- Justin Lasnier -- Yes
- Glen Penner -- Yes
- James Robinson -- Yes

Ward 9

- Tiffany Paulsen -- Refused answer

Ward 10

- Bev Dubois -- Yes
- Dave Ford -- Yes
- Mark Horseman -- Yes

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## Change or status quo?

### Candidates for mayor

BY DAVID HUTTON, THE STARPHOENIX OCTOBER 24, 2009



Candidates at the first mayoral debate, from left: Mayor Don Atchison, Roger Chernoff, Steve Lawrance and Lenore Swystun

**Photograph by:** Greg Pender, The StarPhoenix

Many civic election candidates are talking about how they intend to change Saskatoon. But for many voters, the decision on election day will come down to how much change, if any, they want at city hall.

For the first time since the city returned to a ward-based voting system, every single councillor and the mayor are seeking re-election.

Businessperson Don Atchison, 57, the incumbent mayor, is seeking to extend his six-year tenure to nine. He extols his leadership experience and record on economic development.

His opponents number four and include former councillor and community developer Lenore Swystun, 42, in round two of her challenge to his leadership. In 2006, she gained 22.5 per cent of the vote to Atchison's 64 per cent.

This time, she says there is a "movement" for change, claiming her own polling puts her within striking distance.

While the mayor has trumpeted his record on attracting growth, Swystun has undertaken a direct attack on the direction Atchison is taking the city, lambasting the lack of public consultation at City Hall, in particular with plans to move the Mendel Art Gallery to River Landing.

In debate after debate, Swystun has repeated her message that spending has been done on an ad hoc basis and the city needs a new direction. Taxes are too high, and neighbourhoods are being left behind has been her refrain.

Atchison has retorted that the city's credit rating is strong, the finances in order, and the planning process open and transparent. Balanced growth is happening throughout the city, he says.

Three others are seeking the mayor's chair. Shop foreman Johnny Melenchuk, 46, is running on police accountability and help for students and seniors; street busker Steve Lawrance, 54, has outlined a platform that includes city-wide bike depots; and Roger Chernoff, a former Realtor, is running on a platform of governments misusing power.

Melenchuk, running for the second time, has challenged Atchison, if re-elected, to disband the board of police commissioners if he achieves 5,000 votes.

Three councillors have already been acclaimed. Charlie Clark will return in Ward 6 and Bob Pringle in Ward 7, each for their second term. Ward 9 will have Tiffany Paulsen for a fourth term.

That's a stark change from 2000, when Paulsen was elected after a whopping 15 people came out of the woodwork seeking to win the ward.

Many of the 28 candidates -- five for mayor and 23 for council -- are talking about the importance of getting out the vote, as crucial as any campaign promise at the municipal level.

Atchison has called on more people to vote, worried perhaps, as some election observers have said, that a low turnout and a strong wave of dissatisfaction will hurt his numbers on election night.

Political watchers are worried the low turnout of candidates will be echoed by a low turnout of voters. One group has even challenged Regina in a spirited attempt to get more voters out.

Apathy with City Hall is being blamed in part for the lack of interest.

But others argue that the acclamation of three councillors reflects general satisfaction with the city's government.

The next city council of Saskatoon will take control of a city passing the 220,000 population mark and growing at a rapid pace thanks to an influx of immigrants.

Some of the most significant projects in the city's history are coming on stream and need commanding leadership.

The next council will have to hit the ground running. since there have been no council meetings since September, meaning a backlog of administrative reports will be waiting. Two days after the election the city will either have to figure out how to attract more development for vacant River Landing sites to offset recent cost overruns or if a land payment is not made for Lake Placid's massive hotel-condo megaproject, what to do with the prime property.

Items from the city's waste and recycling plan, with earmarks for more individual containers, a blue box curbside recycling program and green bin organics program will soon come before council.

On this point, the main mayoral candidates have been split. Atchison says it's an issue of tax how far the city goes in implementing a blue box program, while Swystun says it's an investment to increase the life of the landfill.

The most sweeping zoning and development review in decades is underway and the next council will be asked to approve dozens of changes.

The functioning of cities is truly complex but smaller issues, too, are big to some. Council will soon weigh in on whether to allow pets in downtown parks, how to develop Chief Whitecap Park south of the city, whether to allow homeowners to build granny suites, and whether to require the Farmer's Market to open more days each week.

The massive Circle Drive South project, one of the most expensive public projects in the province's history, is expected to be completed in October 2012 -- just in time for another election.

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