



COMMENTARY

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Manitoba Needs to Focus on Rural Growth

What Rural People Need to Look for in this Election Campaign

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Some of Manitoba's greatest resources are in our rural areas, from the people to renewable energy to our natural environment. As we get closer to Manitoba's election date, we as rural people need to know what party has the best plan to renew and rejuvenate the towns and communities outside of the Perimeter Highway. After all, it is in our rural areas where we have the most opportunity to grow and capitalize on our unique resources.

Our province is already known for one kind of renewable energy, hydro. But this election comes at the cusp of growth in new alternate energy options, like biodiesel, ethanol, and wind energy. The next government needs to identify and implement a plan that will help communities harness the power of these new opportunities, inject new life into our rural areas, and provide environmental benefits to us all.

Farmers will have a role to play in whether these initiatives succeed or fail, and all parties need to develop a platform that focuses on farmer participation. We are the ones who will feed biodiesel and ethanol plants with our crops, and make use of the byproducts as livestock feed. Wind turbines will be placed on our land, affecting how we farm around them. To ensure that all of the benefits stay in our communities, it will be critical that government has a plan that will allow and encourage local ownership and the use of local products.

Energy production is just one example of how we can add value in our communities and the agriculture industry. As we move forward, government will have to create a business climate that encourages investment through incentives and tax relief in rural areas. Farmers and rural people are willing to invest in, and benefit from, moving up the value chain but we need to have the opportunity and some level of comfort that the province supports this move ahead.

Another important election discussion should be about how we get products to and from all of these new ventures. For things like alternate energy facilities, rail lines may be the most cost-effective way to get feedstocks in and the final products out to market. Over

the last year, we've seen one privately owned rail line go through the abandonment process and now it looks like it may be torn out between the communities of Morris and Mariapolis.

Instead of idly watching rail line abandonment happen, the next provincial government needs to focus on how it can help in rail line preservation. Every political party is in favour of rural development and alternate energy, but the infrastructure also has to be in place for these initiatives to be successful. As rural people, we need to challenge the next government on how they plan to support all the infrastructure that will help our communities to grow and thrive.

While we focus on rural development, we must also remember our urban neighbours. Many of them no longer have a connection back to the farm or our rural communities, and we need to remind them that we're still here and why we're important to the province. One thing that we all share is our enjoyment of food – particularly those grown, raised or processed by Manitobans. Look to the next provincial government to allocate enough resources to help make all Manitobans aware of the food that is grown and available throughout our province. It may be an important first step in building a bridge between urban and rural people.

Our communities have the opportunity to once again become the economic engine of our province, given the right business climate and commitment from government. When a candidate knocks on your door, ask about their plan for rural Manitoba.