

Population continues to soar

Quarterly record smashed

BY JOE COUTURE, THE STARPHOENIX DECEMBER 21, 2011

Saskatchewan's population grew at a record pace in the third quarter of 2011, reaching a record high.

"There are 1,063,535 reasons to be pleased in Saskatchewan today," Premier Brad Wall told reporters Tuesday. "That's how many citizens we now are. That's a significant amount of growth in the last quarter. It breaks the record for quarterly growth in population in Saskatchewan, which was set the quarter before that. So obviously, it's very positive."

The number of people living in the province increased by 5,651 between July 1 and Oct. 1, according to Statistics Canada data released by the provincial government. With that considered, Saskatchewan had the fastest growth rate of any province in the country for the third quarter of the year.

It was also the most growth ever recorded for the province in any quarter since Statistics Canada started keeping quarterly records in 1971. The previous record was 5,444, set in the previous quarter of this year.

"We have actually a clear goal on this," Wall said. "We'd like to be 1.1 million by 2015. We're on track to maybe beat that goal. Population is important because it's an indicator of two things - principally, that there is an economic opportunity for people to consider here, jobs for people, and also that there's a quality of life here."

In the third quarter, 6,355 people moved to Saskatchewan from other provinces while 5,821 left Saskatchewan to move to another province - a net gain of 534 people. There was a net international gain in the third quarter of 3,436 people and a natural increase (births minus deaths) of 1,681.

That means that "most of the growth is coming from new Canadians," Wall said.

"There are challenges that come with population growth that we need to be prepared for," he added. "That's why we have a housing plan in place and are constantly seeking to improve it. It's why we're focused on infrastructure and why we've been investing in infrastructure for now four-plus years. You'll see a lot more of that kind of investment, I think, in the budget as we want to be ready for the growth."

Saskatchewan's population has increased in every quarter since April 2006 and has grown by more than 70,000 people since that time. Cam Broten, provincial NDP critic for advanced education, employment and immigration, said Tuesday "a good portion of that increase is due to the Saskatchewan immigrant nominee program, which was put in place by the NDP" while that party was in power.

"There are certain challenges," Broten said about growth. "One area would be housing and affordability. In my opinion, the response by the Sask. Party to housing issues has not been adequate. That's one concern for many people. The province needs to ensure the proper services are in place."

Doug Elliott, publisher of provincial statistical newsletter Sask Trends Monitor, said Tuesday that Saskatchewan has regularly been breaking its own population record and the novelty might soon wear off. Alberta has been setting new population records every quarter for most of three decades, he said.

"But it's actually better than I expected," he said of the new numbers. "There was some evidence in the second quarter that the rate of increase was slowing - not that the population was declining, but that it wasn't increasing as quickly.

"But it's picked up again. It's very much steady as she goes. It's pretty much what was happening in the second quarter in terms of where the increase is coming from. Around 2008, we had a much more balanced growth rate - some international and some interprovincial and some natural increase. It's becoming a bit more unbalanced now. Virtually all of the growth is coming from international migration."

Ensuring there are enough jobs for newcomers might become a challenge with numbers showing that the population is now growing faster than new jobs are being created, Elliott said.

"That's why people are coming here - they're not coming here because of the weather, that's for sure," he said.

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