

Closing the Gap

Week 3

Building Resilience for the Future

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Proactive investment in rural infrastructure is essential to Alberta's long-term stability, safety, and economic strength. Rural resiliency is not only about withstanding severe weather events; it is about ensuring that the transportation and utility networks that power Alberta's economic engine remain reliable under growing environmental, industrial, and fiscal pressures.

Roads, bridges, and water systems managed by rural municipalities form the connective tissue of Alberta's economy and the lifeline for hundreds of thousands of residents. These assets support emergency response, industrial activity, supply chains, and community well-being. However, RMA's 2024 Rural Municipal Infrastructure Deficit Project (RMIDP) reports show that rural infrastructure is aging rapidly, deteriorating faster than municipalities can maintain it, and approaching a point where reactive repairs will no longer be financially or operationally sustainable. As these assets decline, the risks extend beyond municipal budgets; they threaten the reliability of the networks that keep Alberta's industries moving.

An increasingly volatile climate is detrimental to sustained economic growth and accelerates infrastructure decay, but in addition to extreme weather, rural industrial growth, population shifts, and escalating construction costs will continue to increase the pressure on rural infrastructure networks. Building resilience is not simply about fixing what is broken; it is also about ensuring Alberta's rural roads, bridges, and utility infrastructure can withstand future pressures and demands while continuing to support the province's economic competitiveness.

Without strategic reinvestment, the resilience that these networks have shown over the past decades will continue to erode, leaving municipalities and rural-based industries increasingly vulnerable to infrastructure failures and escalating costs. The failure of a single rural municipal bridge can have significant impacts on many agricultural producers, oil and gas operators, and entire communities, and these disruptions will ripple across the provincial economy.

Budget 2026 offers the Government of Alberta a critical opportunity to engage in proactive resilience planning. Investing now will protect provincial assets, stabilize municipal budgets, reduce the long-term costs of imposing resiliency measures down the road, and ensure Alberta's infrastructure remains strong to support the province's future.

The Growing Risk of Inaction

RMA's 2024 Rural Municipal Infrastructure Deficit Project showed that rural roads, bridges, and water utilities are already well below optimal condition levels and trending downward.

- ◆ Rural roads: 61% condition rating, with 36% already below 50% condition.
- ◆ Rural bridges: 49% condition rating, with an effective age of 42 years on a 54-year useful life.
- ◆ Rural water utilities: 67% condition rating, with an effective age of 51 years on a 65-year useful life.

These numbers signal aging assets and a system under strain. As infrastructure moves further down the deterioration curve, the cost to maintain it accelerates dramatically, and Alberta's rural municipalities will be less resilient as they struggle to weather hardships while maintaining balanced budgets.

Deferring investment in rural roads, bridges, and utilities will escalate repair and maintenance costs, risk public safety, and erode the reliability of core transportation networks and trade corridors. Without

intervention, Alberta will face more emergency closures, higher long-term costs, and reduced economic output – all of which weaken the province’s economic resilience

Climate Pressures and Infrastructure Vulnerability

An increase in volatile weather events is also amplifying the urgency of reinvestment. More frequent freeze-thaw cycles, heavier precipitation events, and extreme temperature swings accelerate the deterioration of roads and bridges. Rural water systems face increased strain from drought, groundwater variability, and aging treatment infrastructure.

These pressures disproportionately affect rural municipalities due to unique rural cost drivers, such as:

- ◆ Rural infrastructure networks are larger and more exposed
- ◆ Rural tax bases are more volatile due to a heavier reliance on non-residential assessment
- ◆ Rural infrastructure is older and expected to last longer than urban infrastructure
- ◆ Rural maintenance budgets are already stretched due to downloaded services and costs

More extreme weather events are expected to accelerate asset deterioration and renewal timelines, compounding risks for assets already below target condition ratings.

The Canadian Climate Institute’s 2022 report titled *Damage Control: Reducing the Costs of Climate Impacts* makes it clear that every dollar invested in adaptation and resilience today yields significant returns in avoided future costs, even under conservative emissions scenarios. In other words, proactive adaptation consistently outperforms reactive spending, with the benefits arriving quickly.

The report also found that proactive adaptation – such as significant investment in rural infrastructure renewal and resiliency – combined with global emissions reductions is the most effective strategy for reducing long-term damages. For rural municipalities already facing aging assets, stretched maintenance budgets, and growing climate pressures, this means that provincial investment in rural infrastructure is not only fiscally responsible but economically strategic.

Therefore, proactive funding ensures communities can withstand growing industrial demands, demographic change, and climate impacts, while also saving money on future budgets.

Resilience as an Economic Strategy

Resilience is also about protecting and fostering growth in Alberta’s economy as the world continues to evolve in new ways. Rural infrastructure supports industries that generate 41% of Alberta’s investment and 28% of provincial GDP, and future industries are projected to generate much more investment and GDP growth. However, when municipal roads wash out, bridges close, or water systems fail, industrial operations can slow or stop entirely.

With provincial priorities now including the construction of large-scale data centres and associated power generation capacity, expanded oil and gas activity, renewable energy projects, and emerging industries such as critical mineral development, investing in resilient rural transportation infrastructure equates to investing in Alberta’s industrial and economic capacity.

Investing in resilient rural infrastructure will:

- ◆ Reduce transportation time for the oil, gas, forestry, and agricultural industries
- ◆ Protect supply chains that rely on rural transportation networks
- ◆ Support workforce mobility and access to job sites
- ◆ Prevent costly emergency repairs that disrupt industrial activity
- ◆ Ensure long-term reliability for investors and operators

A resilient rural infrastructure network signals to industry that Alberta is prepared for the future and not scrambling to catch up.

Resilience and Community Safety

Beyond industry, safe and reliable infrastructure is the backbone of community resilience. Roads and bridges connect residents to health care, education, and emergency services. When infrastructure deteriorates, response times increase, risks escalate, and communities become more vulnerable. Provincial investment in rural transportation infrastructure is therefore not only an economic imperative, but a commitment to ensuring equitable community support across the province.

Call to Action: Build Alberta's Future Resilience

Rural infrastructure resilience is essential to Alberta's long-term stability, safety, and economic strength. The risks of inaction are growing, and the costs of delay are escalating. Alberta has a critical opportunity to shift from reactive crisis management to proactive resilience planning.

RMA urges the Government of Alberta to recognize rural infrastructure investment as a cornerstone of provincial economic and community resilience. Budget 2026 is an opportunity to begin stabilizing aging assets, reduce long-term costs, and ensure Alberta's transportation and utility networks are resilient enough to withstand future pressures. By prioritizing resilience today, the province can protect communities, safeguard economic activity, and build a stronger, more secure Alberta for generations to come.