

## **The Referendum and Plebiscite Act**

### *A bit of history*

This legislation was first enacted in Saskatchewan in 1991 by the Devine Government. It was touted by the Minister of Justice who introduced the legislation as an illustration of that government's commitment to democratic reform. He said the legislation provided for direct input from the people into the making of government decisions.

It wasn't technically necessary for the government to authorize itself to put questions to the electorate. The Saskatchewan government had put questions to the voters on several occasions prior to 1991 on the topics of liquor and time. But, while the 1991 Act provides for government to propose questions and put them to a vote, it also allows people to petition the government to let them vote on an issue.

There has never been a petition for a vote in Saskatchewan under this Act before. It is fitting that the subject of this petition is provincial funding for public libraries. Libraries in this province came about as a result of petitions provided for under library legislation. Saskatchewan has always had a public libraries Act. It inherited this legislation from the Ordinances of the Northwest Territories out of which the province was created in 1905. The original library legislation allowed citizens to petition their municipal governments to establish libraries. In Regina, for example, the people petitioned for the creation of a library in 1909 – before the streets were paved. This illustrates the importance of libraries in people's lives. It is also somewhat ironic that the \$4.8 million in funding to public libraries that the province has cut in this 2017-18 budget wouldn't even pave a mile of highway.

### *What's required?*

The Act requires that we gather the number of signatures equal to 15% of the voters in the province. According to Elections Saskatchewan, there are 812,224 eligible voters in the province (as of the April 2016 provincial election). That means we must collect 121,834 signatures. Of course, we want to collect many more so that we have a margin of error. We're targeting 125,000, but more is better. There is no time limit on collecting the signatures, but sooner is better for libraries.

### *Who can sign?*

Only persons who are "electors" can sign. This means a person must be at least 18 years old and a Canadian citizen, and their name must be on the voters' list prepared for use in the last federal or provincial or municipal election.

### *What happens if we get enough signatures?*

The Chief Electoral Officer must validate the petition. Elections Saskatchewan won't check every single name, but they will extract a valid sample, randomly selected, and check those to determine if the persons who signed are "electors". Once the petition is validated, the Government is required by law to conduct a vote of the people on the petition question within 12 months. We hope we can avoid an actual vote and put that money into saving Saskatchewan's unique public library system.