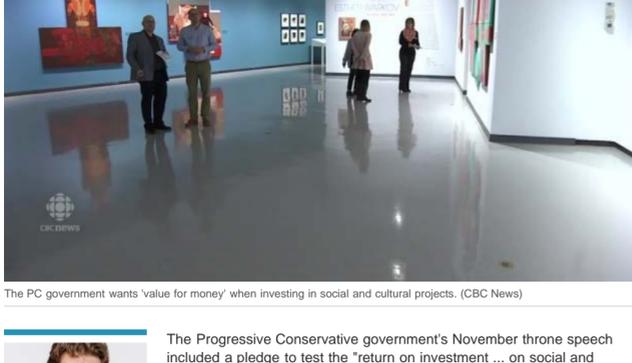


PC government will establish 'return on investment' test of social and cultural projects

Highways and bridge projects to be tested too, but creative industries will need different metrics

By Sean Kavanagh, CBC News Posted: Jan 03, 2017 5:10 AM CT | Last Updated: Jan 03, 2017 5:10 AM CT



The PC government wants 'value for money' when investing in social and cultural projects. (CBC News)



Sean Kavanagh
Provincial Affairs Reporter

Born and raised in Winnipeg, Sean has had a chance to live in some of Canada's other beautiful places (Whistler BC and Lake of the Woods, Ontario) as well as in Europe and the United States. In more than a decade of reporting Sean has covered some of the seminal events in Manitoba, from floods to elections, including a stint as the civic affairs reporter responsible for city hall.

The Progressive Conservative government's November throne speech included a pledge to test the "return on investment ... on social and cultural projects."

But developing that test is still a work in progress, according to Rochelle Squires, the minister of sport, culture and heritage.

The throne speech also suggested highways, bridges and other infrastructure could be subject to a similar test.

To set the stage for creating those measurements, the PCs are launching a cultural strategy review in 2017, something that hasn't been done in the province since 1990.

Squires says the cultural industry is one of the fastest-growing sectors in Manitoba, employing 22,000 people and contributing millions of dollars to the economy.



Sport, culture and heritage minister Rochelle Squires says Tories want to know 'what's working and what can be improved' in Manitoba's cultural sector. (CBC News)

"We have got one of the most dynamic international industries and economies in the province and what we want to do as a government is just to make some smart investments to enhance and grow that culture economy," Squires said

So the challenge, Squires says is to find out "what's working, and what can be improved upon?"

The PC government has struck a committee to advise on the direction of cultural policy.

ROI on art?

The question of a return on investment in culture can be a difficult one, especially for artists, to answer.



Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra conductor Alexander Mickelthwate says the arts 'give humanity a voice.' (wso.ca)

Alexander Mickelthwate, the music director of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra can answer why culture is important in an instant.

"For me it is the highest expression of humanity. The most beautiful visual or audible creations that one can think of, and a massive counterpart to our everyday lives ... it goes way beyond one little arts organization. It gives humanity a voice," Mickelthwate said.

But Mickelthwate also knows it takes money to make a concerto and argues that an investment in arts and culture returns in multiples.

"The investment that is coming in is like ten-fold coming back," he says, citing the jobs the symphony creates and the programs it does in the community .

Potholes vs. poetry

Winnipeg lawyer and philanthropist Gail Asper is equally passionate about the impact of culture on society.

"We do need food and shelter but we also need things that stimulate our hearts and minds. That's why humans have always been making music and dancing and storytelling — since humanity began," Asper said.

"We need to fix the potholes so we can drive to the theatres — we need both. It's not either/or."
— Gail Asper

But Asper, whose family helped fund and championed the creation of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, also believes a return on investment for social and cultural projects is important. She calls it the "responsible thing to do."

"I think that this something that anybody who's making any kind of investment, as a donor or as a government person or as somebody who's driving the initiative, they always want to ask themselves — why am I doing this?" Asper told CBC News.



Arts supporter Gail Asper says 'we need to fix the potholes so we can drive to the theatres — we need both. It's not either/or.' (CBC News)

Asper is keenly aware there is debate over investing in these kind of projects.

"The arts are the roses that make our lives worth living ... people always say, 'but what about the potholes?' And I always say well, yes, we need to fix the potholes so we can drive to the theatres — we need both. It's not either/or," Asper said.

Asper welcomes specific tests on projects, but says it should go hand-in-hand with general improvements to arts funding. She researched funding models extensively while lobbying for support for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. She found western Canada gets less from the federal government in arts funding than eastern provinces do.

Arts funding has declined for years

In her analysis Asper also found Manitoba used to have a much better track record on arts funding.

"Manitoba, years ago, used to be the second-highest funder of the arts, right behind Quebec ... in the last few years we've sunk to the middle of the pack," Asper said.

So while Asper says some kind of metrics or test on project funding for social and cultural projects is appropriate, more money should be made available. She's convinced it does provide a return on investment and urges Manitoba's government to look west.

"The star of this is Brad Wall. Our neighbour ... has almost doubled, if not tripled their arts funding. They recognize that to make a community attractive to live in — and visit — you have to have a thriving, supported arts and cultural scene," Asper said.

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Squires knows arts funding hasn't kept pace with other provinces.

"Under the previous administration they doubled the debt during a decade and yet they did not increase the funding for the arts community. So we know that when our government took office we inherited a major cultural deficit," Squires told CBC News.

But it's too early to say if recognizing there is a need means more funding to the Manitoba Arts Council in the next budget.

Squires does say the return on investment test won't be the same for public works as it will be for creating works of art.

"When we talk about our rate of return on investment with highways, for example, we are definitely going to be looking at entirely different metrics and criteria for evaluating whether that was a good investment for Manitoba taxpayers. When we are looking at investing in arts and culture it's a very different dynamic and very different mindset," Squires said.

However, if Squires is looking for more precision on where to make project investments, she might ask a recent addition to Winnipeg.

Creativity can be lucrative

Alan Freeman worked in the U.K. as a principal economist for the city of London for several years. He moved to Winnipeg, in part after being charmed by the city's cultural community. Freeman helped create data sets in Great Britain that show money invested in cultural industries can deliver solid, quantifiable returns, in tax revenues and jobs for example.

"There is a science now. We have created a method of measuring the real economic impact of a dollar, in terms of how much dollars it brings back. There [are] a lot of pieces to put together, but it's not cold fusion," Freeman said.

"How do you want to go down in history? To pioneer a new approach to creativity and culture or go down in history as the man who lost Winnipeg's soul?"
— economist Alan Freeman

But he says the words "social and cultural" should be dropped from the government's search for a mandate and the word "creative" should be substituted in.

Freeman argues "social and cultural" pursuits, work done by musicians and actors for example, have to be expanded to include other activities that are creative in nature — software development, video game creation, advertising, even someone designing lottery tickets.

"That person is of course [not] yearning to produce a Brahms symphony, but they are being equally creative in each job," Freeman said.

Freeman says each side of a larger creative industry — say, cello players and video game designers — need each other to thrive.



Cultural economist Alan Freeman says investments in creativity can be measured. (CBC News)

"Look at the synergy between the video games industry and the classical music industry. You can go to any modern video game, they are either playing heavy rock or they are playing classical — orchestrated scores they are using," Freeman says.

Time and time again, Freeman says people involved in one creative industry will go to see what the others have to offer: visiting visual art galleries, new music festivals and other cultural activities. They feed each other, and Winnipeg, he says, has the raw material.

"They will get inspiration. They will think of things they never thought of," Freeman said.

Freeman has an almost existential question he believes Premier Brian Pallister and his government should answer when making decisions about investing in social and cultural projects.

"How do you want to go down in history? To pioneer a new approach to creativity and culture or go down in history as the man who lost Winnipeg's soul?" Freeman asked.

Freeman's further warning to the government: if you lose something, it may take a long time to return — like the Winnipeg Jets.

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