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Countdown to price hikes: Higher fees, tougher laws among Sask. changes start in new year

Changes include higher SGI fees, tougher impaired driving laws, shorter EI waiting periods

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A number of changes to legislation, service fees and rates will come into effect on New Year's Day. (Graeme Roy/CP)

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A number of changes to Saskatchewan legislation, services fees and utility rates will come into effect when the clock strikes 12 at midnight on Dec. 31.

Rates for power and SGI services will go up and laws for impaired driving will get tougher.

There will be good news for people needing to claim Employment Insurance, with the waiting period for payments being halved as of Jan. 1.

Here's a breakdown of the changes that will kick in on New Year's Day in Saskatchewan:

SaskPower rates go up

SaskPower rates will increase by 3.5 per cent on Jan. 1. The government says that will increase fees for the average residential customer by about \$4 a month.

The power supplier had originally requested a five per cent increase but the Saskatchewan Rate Review Panel said in November that rate was too high.

SaskPower rate hike too high, says review panel

Instead, it recommended the 3.5 per cent hike, which was approved by provincial cabinet on Dec. 1. The upcoming increase follows another five per cent increase implemented on July 1, 2016.

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The government says a 3.5 per cent increase in SaskPower rates will increase fees for the average residential customer by about \$4 a month. (CBC)

Saskatoon Light & Power rate increase

Earlier this month, city council followed SaskPower's lead by approving an overall electrical rate increase of 3.5 per cent, raising fees by about \$4 per month for the average residential customer.

The local utility also matched SaskPower's rate in 2015, when they increased by two per cent on Sept. 1.

Changes to impaired driving laws

On Oct. 31, the Saskatchewan government announced it was introducing **tougher penalties** for drunk driving.

- Drivers with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of .04-.08 will have their vehicles seized for three days on a first offence.
- All new drivers, and those who are under the age of 21, will receive a 60-day licence suspension for a first offence. The existing law only applies to new drivers and people under the age of 19.
- Impaired drivers found to have a BAC exceeding .08 will be forced to use vehicle breathalyzers for longer periods of time.

Changes to cellphone use while driving

Saskatchewan's current law only penalizes people who use their phones when driving, but that's changing come the new year.

Tougher restrictions on cellphone use prohibit drivers from "holding, viewing, using or manipulating" a cellphone while driving. The existing law only restricts people from "using" their phones while behind the wheel.

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Under the proposed rule changes, experienced drivers found to have .04 to .08 per cent alcohol in their blood will have their vehicles seized and impounded for three days. (Darryl Dyck/Canadian Press)

Shorter waiting periods for EI

Starting Jan. 1, the waiting period for Employment Insurance will be halved from two weeks to one week.

The federal government said the change, announced on Dec. 21, would help ease financial strain because the waiting period acts like

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a deductible for other types of insurance.

- **El overhaul will extend benefits, shorten wait times**

For an eligible claimant who is laid off and subsequently finds work after 12 weeks, the government said the change would mean that up to 11 weeks of EI benefits would be payable.

SGI price hikes

Saskatchewan Government Insurance confirmed on Dec. 20 it was **raising its fees**, many of them for the first time in 10 years. It said it was moving towards a system in which costs would be covered by customers using the service, not subsidized by all vehicle owners.

- Class 5 driver's licence testing will increase from \$22 to \$55 – an increase of 150 per cent.
- Ignition interlock program — \$105 (from \$30).
- New photo on driver's licence — \$15 (from \$10).
- Written exam to become a driver instructor — \$85 (from \$10).
- Replace licence plate — \$15 (from \$10).
- Heavy trailer road test — \$100 (from \$40).
- Safe driver recognition appeal — \$100 (from \$25).

Sask. Workers' comp rates paid by employers decline

The average employer premium rate drops to \$1.24 per \$100 of assessed payroll from \$1.34. That's a decline of 7.5 per cent.

The rates differ depending on the industry, but there are declines in most categories.

For example, in the restaurant industry, the rate per \$100 is declining to 82 cents from 87 cents.

In a relatively small number of categories, the rate is increasing slightly.

For instance, in open pit mining, the premium per \$100 is going up a penny from 2016's 86 cents.



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