

Sessional Statement – May 2021

Mr. Speaker, I want to begin by welcoming all my colleagues back to the Chamber for this sitting of the 19th Legislative Assembly. I look forward to providing updates on key issues, and mandate priorities, as well as hearing from Regular Members on issues important to residents over the course of the next seven sitting days.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to take some time to talk about community, and how that term has a renewed meaning not only with trying to address COVID- 19, but also in the last few weeks due to the impacts of flooding in many regions in the NWT. It has been incredible to watch residents support one another during such a challenging times.

Hundreds of residents have been impacted by the flooding, some having lost everything, others facing significant repairs and efforts to replace possessions they lost. Some of what has been lost cannot be replaced.

Mr. Speaker, no matter the challenges we are faced with in the Northwest Territories, there is a sense of community that is special and unique to us alone. No matter the emergency we are faced with; a global pandemic, forest fires, or flooding; no one can take that sense of community away from us. Every single person in the NWT has been negatively impacted by this pandemic, and yet the community still came together to support others in need.

During the early days of the flooding, residents, businesses, and organizations stepped up and volunteered their time and money to help those who were impacted by the floods.

You opened your doors to your neighbours who needed a warm bed to sleep in since they could not sleep in their own. You donated airplanes full of groceries, and hundreds of thousands of dollars to the United Way. Let us not forget the 2,500 pieces of Kentucky Fried Chicken, Mr. Speaker. People came together to support those who needed it the most.

Our government, Mr. Speaker, was there to provide support however it was needed. Local leadership on the ground, with the support of Municipal and Community Affairs Emergency Management Organization and volunteers worked day and night to ensure residents were safe, and had what they needed. A multi-departmental effort helped to provide staff and supplies, including a temporary medical centre, to support efforts on the ground.

The responsibility of managing a community emergency rests with local governments, and when they made requests for additional support, we were there to ensure they were able to take care of their residents. And as recovery continues and the flood damage is assessed, I want residents to know that we will be there to support you in your recovery.

Mr. Speaker, the Northwest Territories is vast, twice the size of Texas. Our 33 communities are spread out, and in many instances, separated by great distances. But when one community needs our support, the Northwest Territories stands strong with them.

To everyone who contributed to the flood relief efforts, you are what makes the Northwest Territories such a special place to live. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker, the strength and resilience of our communities and residents across the Northwest Territories shines brightly as we continue to address the COVID-19 pandemic. The response to the NJ MacPherson outbreak in Yellowknife is an example of over a year of work preparing for the possibility of such an event. Safety and preparedness have been our top priorities since the pandemic began, and the response to contain this outbreak is an example of the hard work of so many to protect residents and communities.

The response of our health care and support professionals has been incredible. They have continued to go above and beyond to protect our residents and loved ones from the virus. I am extremely appreciative for their continued dedication to keeping our communities safe.

As well, Mr. Speaker, the response of our whole community has been overwhelming. Everyone worked together to support one another, and those self-isolating or tested positive. This community always comes together when times are challenging, and this has been no different.

Because this outbreak impacted our youngest residents, the GNWT worked diligently to secure doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to begin administering to those aged 12 to 17. Our youth were some of the first in the country to get the vaccine, Mr. Speaker, a true testament of our efforts to protect as many residents as we can from COVID-19.

Since the first case was confirmed, a tremendous amount of work has gone on behind the scenes to understand the extent of the spread, and to contain it as quickly as possible. Because of this hard work, not only by our Chief Public Health Officer and her team, but by our incredible residents and businesses as well, we were able to prevent community transmission in Yellowknife and surrounding areas.

However, it is important to put things into perspective. While we are encouraged to see residents getting vaccinated at a higher rate than most jurisdictions in Canada, we still have work to do, especially in some of our smaller communities.

Mr. Speaker, getting vaccinated is the right thing to do. It protects yourself, your family, your neighbours, and those most vulnerable including our children, and the important knowledge keepers in communities, our Elders. If we all do our part, we can begin to get back to the things we love, like community feasts, hand games tournaments, and travelling.

Every person who gets vaccinated plays an important part in our effort to beat COVID-19, in our combined efforts to protect the health and well-being of our communities and loved ones. Please, get vaccinated. The Government of Canada has talked about a one-dose

summer, where 75% of residents across Canada getting their first dose means things may start to return to normal. We all want that, Mr. Speaker, so let us keep doing our part.

Mr. Speaker, the Government of the Northwest Territories is ready to turn its attention to the economic and social recovery of our great territory. The pandemic has brought into sharper focus the urgent need to act on social and economic development.

Like every other jurisdiction, residents and businesses were asked to make great sacrifices to help protect the NWT from COVID-19. While we have largely escaped the worst of the health impacts, residents did suffer economic, financial and social losses and the GNWT is committed to helping the territory recover and come back stronger than before.

The majority of our economic and social challenges are not new though. Many of the effects of the pandemic were a result of social and economic gaps and challenges that existed before the pandemic and which the GNWT, businesses and communities were already working to address. Continuing that work and accelerating it where it makes sense, is going to be a key part of how the GNWT helps promote recovery.

Mr. Speaker, we are committed to working on the social and economic recovery of the Northwest Territories so we can emerge stronger, and we have been engaging with multiple sectors on a plan. We will be tabling this plan later in this sitting and will continue the discussion about how we will work together as a territory to promote recovery over the coming months and years.

Mr. Speaker, the partnerships we have forged during this pandemic has shown us the importance of collaboration, and community, in a time of crisis. Our success depends on partnership with all levels of government and working closely with all stakeholders. The support of Indigenous and municipal governments, residents and businesses has kept the people of the NWT largely safe from the waves of the virus that continues to affect other parts of the country and the world.

Mr. Speaker, we are fortunate to have not experienced the same level of health impacts we see elsewhere. With the guidance of the Office of the Chief Public Health Officer, we have been able to keep many businesses open, while still protecting NWT residents. At the same time, we know that some areas of our economy have been particularly hard hit, and that many residents have been suffering.

As we have responded to the pandemic, residents, communities, and businesses have been very open in identifying the impacts and actions most needed to position ourselves to seize the opportunities that the post pandemic expansion will offer. By working closely with stakeholders to implement our mandate and the Emerging Stronger plan, we have the opportunity to set the NWT up to be in a position to thrive.

This includes continuing to build on our strong relationship with the federal government. Mr. Speaker, Canada understands the impact the pandemic has had on the North. Covid-19

has laid bare the gaps in our society, and the federal budget released in April addresses several shared priorities and reflects that they are listening to what our needs are.

Investments in housing, child care, climate change, the green economy, and job creation are examples of their commitment to closing those gaps and ensuring a prosperous Northwest Territories for generations to come.

Canada's commitment to ensuring people are not left behind as we move forward aligns with our efforts to create a better future for our territory and its residents. Mr. Speaker, Canada is investing in areas that are important to our future and will benefit our efforts to meet the commitments outlined in our mandate.

Mr. Speaker, in the federal budget, we were heard. Our government had identified a number of areas for potential funding including infrastructure, housing, connectivity, health, postsecondary education, climate change, and early childhood education. Working closely with Canada and continuing to strengthen an already positive relationship will help support our goal of social and economic recovery.

Mr. Speaker, I am optimistic that we share common goals between our governments, and I look forward to learning more about how we will benefit from the commitments made by Canada in the coming months.

We have faced one of the most difficult challenges our society has faced in the last century. It has not been easy. But I am confident that in the coming months, by working together, that we will begin to emerge from the pandemic and return to the things we love.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Government of the Northwest Territories has been committed to protecting the health and well-being of residents, and to this point, we have been successful. Mr. Speaker, we are also committed to ensuring a social and economic recovery that will make the Northwest Territories stronger and support the success of residents now and into the future.

If we have learned anything in this pandemic, it is the importance of strong and collaborative relationships built on mutual respect, trust, and understanding. We have learnt the sense of community.

Mr. Speaker, as we go forward, we will continue to work with Indigenous leaders, community governments, the federal government, stakeholder groups, the business community, and residents, to ensure a holistic approach to our collective efforts to emerge from this pandemic a stronger Northwest Territories. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.