

Increasing Economic Diversification Across the Northwest Territories

Mr. Speaker, the value and potential of achieving greater economic diversification across the Northwest Territories has been talked about over the course of many years and multiple governments. The need to have that conversation meaningfully has never been greater. Even as we work to support new mineral resource exploration and development, the reality is that our existing economic drivers in the form of the diamond mines are approaching their planned closure. We must face that prospect on all fronts, including economic diversification.

The fact that this conversation has been had and that success in diversifying remains elusive suggests that we need to try something different.

The Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment is currently leading work on developing Regional Economic Development Plans. These will provide insight into economic opportunities and challenges that exist in six of the territory's regions. Regional Economic Development Plans are a requirement of the Government of the Northwest Territories' mandated commitment to increase economic diversification by supporting growth in non-extractive sectors and setting regional diversification targets.

The idea of developing a regional plan is not in itself new but I believe the way in which we are approaching this work is. Before beginning, we went out to the regions to ask how the process of development should be structured. With regional feedback, we established terms of reference for an overall facilitator to ensure there is a strong northern voice that emerges from these plans, but we are also utilizing local facilitators to support the regional work.

With regional facilitators, it is my expectation that we will see more strongly the strengths of individual regions. It might be that directing government supports towards a promising area in one region only produces a small change to GDP but has a disproportionate change on the local economy and employment. While sectors such as tourism, arts, the traditional

economy, and even agriculture, offer opportunities in nearly all NWT communities but perhaps in different forms or at different levels; opportunities in other sectors like fishing, forestry, satellite communications, and manufacturing are more specific to regions and individual communities. By both breaking down our constituent parts but also keeping the strength of the NWT as a whole, I believe these plans together will provide a new, better road map to support residents, businesses, and local governments.

Mr. Speaker, public conversations on the development of Regional Economic Development Plans began last week in Hay River and Fort Smith to advance ideas for economic development in the South Slave. From now through January, engagements will take place online and in public meetings in the five additional regions.

Regardless of subject, progress begins with dialogue and a mutual understanding of possibilities, and I am looking forward to seeing the results of these important conversations.

Mr. Speaker, our efforts to advance regional economic growth and diversity are not limited to the design of these plans.

They are supported by ongoing efforts to advance innovation in the NWT and to foster a knowledge economy that will cultivate entrepreneurship through an Innovation Action Plan that is due out later this fall.

ITI is also working with the Department of Education, Culture, and Employment to deliver on the Arts Strategy and improve support for artists, musicians, and filmmakers.

Also, together with the Department of Finance, we continue the work to revamp our approach to government procurement and contracting in order to maximize benefits to residents and businesses. That work has also progressed significantly with some proposals for change due out this fall and some improvements to processes already implemented.

Mr. Speaker, I cannot speak about economic diversification in the NWT without speaking to the tourism industry. I had the opportunity to attend a meeting of the Council of Canadian Tourism Ministers last week and discovered that many areas of predicted industry growth such as Indigenous cultural experiences and opportunities for sustainable or regenerative tourism are already present in the NWT. As I prepare to address the membership of NWT Tourism next week, I think it is worth highlighting the extraordinary steps initiated by the GNWT to deliver over \$13 million dollars in supports and programs for the tourism industry in the NWT since the onset of the COVID pandemic in 2020.

Upcoming sessions to design and develop Regional Economic Development Plans are a space to have this kind of conversation and to empower residents and their businesses to identify, develop and pursue the economic potential they identify.

Guided by Northerners, supported by governments, and driven by regional business and investment, Regional Economic Development Plans will set the stage for increased economic opportunity and diversity across the NWT.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.