

COVID-19 and the NWT Economy

Mr. Speaker, the COVID-19 global pandemic has impacted every aspect of life in our territory.

The Government of the Northwest Territories has responded to the pandemic in a variety of ways. In addition to the measures taken to protect the health and safety of our residents and communities, our government has acted to mitigate the economic impacts of this crisis on our economy, and to invest in the economic well-being of Northwest Territories industry and businesses.

Mr. Speaker, we knew that for our economy to recover, we would need our mines and supporting industries to be operating, small businesses to be open, and our people to be working.

That being said, our first priority was to address the health and safety of entrepreneurs, business owners, and their employees. Following that, we acted to ensure that Northwest Territories communities and residents would continue to receive critical supplies. With so many remote and dispersed communities, we are acutely aware of the importance of the supply chain, perhaps more so than some of our southern counterparts.

Since these initial first steps, Mr. Speaker, the Departments of Infrastructure and Industry, Tourism and Investment have rolled out a sequence of measured and organized steps, in tandem with the federal government, to ensure funding reliefs are available.

Some of these reliefs include waiving fees impacting truckers and air carriers to provide nearly \$2.5 million dollars in economic relief. We have also continued to advocate regularly to the federal government, on behalf of northern airlines facing unprecedented operating challenges due to the pandemic.

Capital loans have also been made available through the Business Development and Investment Corporation to businesses that needed immediate liquidity.

Mr. Speaker, since March 20th, the GNWT has committed over \$20 million dollars in off-sets and supports for NWT businesses.

Collectively, our territory, its governments, business chambers, and stakeholder organizations, have been able to deliver the message in Ottawa that we need specific and regionally-appropriate support programs for our businesses.

As a supplement to Canada's national business relief plans, CanNor's Northern Business Relief Fund significantly expanded relief options for NWT and Indigenous businesses.

On May 8th, the Minister of Finance announced \$8.7 million for NWT airlines; the first of two phases of federal funding to help maintain the critical links that they provide. On May 12th, with support from the federal government, the GNWT then announced a \$6.2 million plan to top up wages for workers making less than \$18 per hour.

Through all of this Mr. Speaker, we have also worked with our mines and resource companies to ensure their safe and continued operation. We have taken steps to protect mineral tenure in the NWT by suspending payment and work requirements until the end of June, and will be extending this relief for an additional 90 days.

We will need our resource sector to anchor our recovery. Mining and exploration are the biggest source of private sector jobs and income for our residents, and as we get back to business, will be a major buyer of products and services from NWT companies.

The Mining Incentive Program has been adapted to support NWT prospectors and company-led mineral exploration projects, and to ensure that their projects this summer will be in line with orders and conditions of the Chief Public Health Officer.

Mr. Speaker, much has been said about the need for economic stimulus and recovery but it is only thanks to our investments in relief efforts that we are able now to look forward.

As we do, an important component of economic stimulus and recovery will be investment in GNWT infrastructure projects. Not only will these projects inject money into the economy, they will provide business and employment opportunities for our residents.

In 2020/2021 the GNWT is planning to invest over \$500 million in infrastructure throughout the NWT. This will allow us to deliver a total of 152 capital projects in 28 NWT communities, including schools, long-term care and health care facilities, and major transportation projects. Many of these projects are multi-year projects that will begin or continue this year. This investment continues to leverage significant federal infrastructure dollars.

Mr. Speaker, the GNWT will continue to advocate and work with the federal government on infrastructure initiatives that lead to jobs, economic growth, and prosperity for both the NWT and Canada.

Meanwhile, as NWT businesses begin to resume operations across the North, we have re-introduced our Support for Entrepreneurs and Economic Development Policy Program for the 20-2021 fiscal year. It represents \$4 million dollars of potential investment into projects in which community employment is emphasized, and where the bulk of the funding will be spent in our communities.

Similarly, we will inject almost \$4.4 million into parks infrastructure, tourism product development and community infrastructure projects this summer; supporting local suppliers, contractors, and employees as we improve our tourism product for the future.

As we begin to Emerge Wisely from public health measures, Mr. Speaker, economic recovery will begin within our territory, and will depend greatly on what we can do for each other. The importance of the “BuyNorth” or “ShopNWT” message has never been as true as it is today.

Our recovery will also have to be in step with the needs and capacity of our business community.

The new Business Advisory Council will be the voice of NWT business to my office. It will ensure that the experience, talent, and resources of the NWT’s private sector are considered in our decision making. And, as we look ahead, I believe the collective world-wide effort that will be put into economic recovery will bring new opportunities.

If we can position ourselves to learn from the wave of innovation that I believe we will see, we can re-imagine our own economy for the future; one that continues to promote our wealth of natural resources, but also encourages a more diversified and resilient economy that builds upon our natural strengths.

Thank you Mr. Speaker