

**Pivoting to Support NWT Businesses through COVID**

Mr. Speaker, in addition to describing these times as unprecedented, the need to “pivot” business models and methods has become one of the buzz words during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Almost all businesses in the Northwest Territories have had to adjust the way they operate or do business. There was obviously a need to invest in order to protect employees and clients such as through protective barriers or personal protective equipment. Beyond that, in many cases, businesses have actually changed the way they offer their goods or services: from going online to then offering curbside pick-up; and from staycations, to offering new products that respond to new needs. Northwest Territories businesses have done so much to respond to the circumstances of COVID-19.

In turn, the Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment continues to respond to the changing needs of the NWT’s business community.

New COVID-focused Support for Entrepreneurs and Economic Development guidelines were introduced early on in the pandemic, favouring projects that would help businesses recover – and contribute to the recovery of others.

An additional new funding option was introduced for NWT artists and commercial film and media arts producers whose activities and revenues were restricted due to physical-distancing requirements.

In June, as our government moved to Phase II of the Emerging Wisely Plan, the Support for Entrepreneurs and Economic Development program was adapted again, to specifically support businesses re-opening or pivoting to meet new operating requirements.

In an already challenging year for mineral exploration, we were able to make changes to our Mining Incentive Program that helped companies navigate COVID, related costs and prioritized NWT-based service providers. Through this program we distributed \$1 million to seven companies and 13 prospectors.

Mr. Speaker, it is not only businesses who have had to change direction. With less than a year to go until the release of our 2021-2025 tourism strategy, and with a sudden and necessary new focus on recovery, we went back to the drawing board this summer re-engaging with the tourism industry on a new set of questions and seeking opportunities for both short- and long-term rebuilding through a COVID lens.

In order to help support this particularly hard hit sector, ITI, in partnership with CanNor, created the Growth and Recovery by Investing in Tourism, or GRIT, as a new initiative that helps respond to the needs of NWT businesses. By moving budgets away from international marketing, the \$1.5 million GRIT fund was introduced in August and by September, it was clear that the initiative was going to be over-subscribed so we have since taken additional steps to meet this demand.

Mr. Speaker, back in July the BuyNorth Campaign was also introduced, in partnership with Northern News Services Limited Media, to support and promote businesses as they pivot, re-open and start to recover from the impacts of COVID.

This, too, was a new approach to business support. ITI sponsorship allows all NWT businesses to have a presence on the BuyNorth web page for free – and provides an umbrella for other initiatives like the NWT Chamber’s #shopNWT campaign to heighten the importance and appreciation for shopping local.

Mr. Speaker, in April and May, at the height of the pandemic and with strict economic lockdown measures in place, NWT businesses saw revenues decline by an average of 63% - and almost 70% were in the challenging position of being closed or partially closed.

Yet, 93% of NWT businesses surveyed at the time still felt that they would be able to survive.

Mr. Speaker, I have described a few ways businesses have pivoted and ways that ITI has helped support some of those efforts. To pivot means not only to turn and change once; it can also mean the changing continues as circumstances develop. Northern businesses and entrepreneurs have kept changing and staying current and responsive to these unprecedented times. Mr. Speaker, the government, too, will continue to adapt its response and supports to these changing needs. Just as our business community has stayed responsive, so too will the support from the GNWT.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.