

THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE COCHRANE
PREMIER OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

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Mr. Speaker, I want to welcome everyone back to the Chamber for the resumption of the Second Session of the 19th Legislative Assembly. We have a lot of work ahead of us over the next two months, and I look forward to working in close collaboration and partnership with both sides of this House. We all have the best interests of the Northwest Territories and its people in mind, and as we make progress on the priorities of this Legislative Assembly, it will be for the benefit of current and future generations of NWT residents.

Mr. Speaker, the last year has been one of the most challenging times the Northwest Territories and its residents have ever experienced. When the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March last year, we turned our attention to what remains today as the most important priority of this government: protecting the health and well-being of our residents and communities.

The rising number of cases across southern Canada and the rest of the world has forced millions back into lockdown situations to flatten the curve and protect the integrity of their health care systems. Watching this happen, it is hard not to feel fortunate that we have been able to keep the number of cases in the NWT low. Mr. Speaker, over the last year, we have learned a lot about how to manage a public health crisis of this magnitude. We established pandemic services and initiated a health response as quickly as we could, and it paid off. As we began to better understand how to protect our residents from the threat of COVID-19, we moved our pandemic services under one roof. The COVID-19 Secretariat has been able to improve our services and find ways to lower the costs to taxpayers. This has happened all while supporting the health orders in place and protecting the health and well-being of our territory.

The Government of the Northwest Territories successful containment of the public health risk puts us in a position where we can begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel. A big part of our success as a territory rests with residents. We have continued to follow the advice of our Chief Public Health Officer and have been diligent in following the public health orders and recommendations. Mr. Speaker, the pandemic has put us to the test like nothing we have ever faced in our lifetime. It has threatened our health, impacted our economic well-being, and disconnected us from the support networks we all rely on. But we rose to the occasion and have all played a part in our collective success. On behalf of all Cabinet, I thank you.

Mr. Speaker, a vaccine is here. In the final days of 2020, a FedEx cargo plane landed at the Yellowknife Airport carrying the first doses of the Moderna vaccine. The Department of Health and Social Services, territorial health authorities and all the Government of the Northwest Territories departments worked long hours to develop a vaccination strategy that would ensure we were able to vaccinate seniors, health care workers, and those living in communities with limited health care infrastructure first. We have always said we would protect the most vulnerable, and we have delivered. Since February 1, we have been able to vaccinate over 12,000 residents, and have the highest number of doses administered by province or territory in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, I am proud of the work that has been done by the public service to protect our territory. They have heeded the call and put the lives of residents and the communities they live in before their own. Just last month, we had our first community outbreak. A scenario that we all hoped would never happen. It was all hands-on deck to protect Fort Liard and limit the possibility of a serious outbreak of COVID-19. Health care professionals went into the community to do contact tracing and rapid testing. We worked closely with local leadership to ensure they could support their residents. We went door-to-door to provide information in English and Dene Zhatie. We worked with local leadership to ensure residents had access to food and essentials. Mr. Speaker, our emergency response effort ensured we were able to protect the community.

While we are making progress in our vaccination efforts, it is important to remember that we all must continue to abide by the public health orders and recommendations put forward by the Chief Public Health Officer. Mr. Speaker, it's been evidence-based decision-making that has put us in the position we are today to begin to see a Northwest Territories post-pandemic. We are all feeling the growing fatigue of the pandemic. This has been a long and difficult year, but it has been our resilience that has got us to where we are.

As the second wave has swept across southern Canada and the world, leading to restrictive measures and lockdowns, we believe we are in a good position to weather the storm because of our pandemic response. Mr. Speaker, managing the public health crisis is essential. Managing it well puts us in a better position to start to shift our attention to social and economic recovery, and how we preserve business. Especially those sectors hit hardest, like tourism and hospitality.

A coordinated response to the pandemic includes economic stability and we recognize the importance of both maintaining the financial viability of our businesses and protecting the health of residents. The health and well-being of all communities and residents is best served by maintaining a stable economic environment. Our government has acted to mitigate the economic impacts of this crisis on our economy by investing in NWT industry and businesses.

The pandemic caused a steep economic decline in the NWT. Just as it did in other jurisdictions throughout Canada and around the world. The NWT is recovering from this economic downturn. The GNWT and federal government recognized the economic hardship dealt by the pandemic and worked quickly to provide much needed supports for NWT residents and businesses. Mr. Speaker, we will continue to work with the federal government as we design our recovery strategy. Our economic response has been supported greatly by the federal government. We have received over \$120 million in funding to cover the costs of our pandemic response, which includes economic injections for the airline industry, tourism, mining, and small businesses. The relationship we have been able to build with Canada has played a significant part in supporting residents and businesses through this unprecedented time.

We recognize that many of these NWT public health measures have placed an economic and financial burden on our residents. Until the health crisis is brought under control though, a full recovery of the NWT economy will be slow. Mr. Speaker, recovery is key. We need to ensure our people have jobs and our businesses are thriving. We must keep housing, food security, children's needs, health, and education, top of mind to improve the lives of all NWT residents. We need to manage the immediate risk of the COVID-19 pandemic while we continue to advance our long-term priorities, particularly when it comes to growing our economy, and ensuring a healthy, vibrant, and educated territory for years to come.

We have responded to the pandemic in a variety of ways, including efforts 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. 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.

Tourism is a critical part of the economy, and we are committed to ensuring its recovery. We need the jobs tourism creates, the entrepreneurial opportunities it generates, the infrastructure that supports it and the revenue that all of this provides to our economy. Mr. Speaker, COVID-19 has changed how we as a government will need to support tourism in coming years, and we are committed to ensuring that this important part of our economy begins to flourish once again.

One of our government's guiding principles is to ensure that the expenditure of public funds maximizes economic benefits to Northerners and supports Northern business. This is consistent with our longstanding commitment to support Northwest Territories businesses and grow a strong, diversified economy. Government procurement and contracting is a source of economic activity throughout the NWT, and residents and businesses should benefit as much as possible. At the end of the day we want more NWT residents working and advancing their careers and more businesses thriving and growing in our territory. Mr. Speaker, we have committed in our mandate to work with NWT businesses to strengthen GNWT procurement policies and practices and we are moving ahead with a review of these

policies to strike a balance between supporting Indigenous and NWT businesses and the principles of public procurement.

As we plot our social and economic recovery, the business community, NGOs, all levels of government, and residents will all play an important role in helping to identify needed actions and investments. By applying the invaluable experience and insight into our decision making, I am confident that we can move forward and emerge from this crisis to revitalize, strengthen and grow our economy and social fabric into the future. We will continue to focus on our economic and social recovery, how we preserve business, and ensure as much of this investment stays in the Northwest Territories.

Mr. Speaker, infrastructure projects will play a significant role in our economic recovery. The Legislative Assembly sees this need, and that is why a \$451 million capital budget was approved for 2021-2022. Injecting money into the economy will provide business and employment opportunities for residents, while delivering the critical infrastructure the NWT needs to provide important programs and services. This is one of the largest capital investments in the history of the territory and creating jobs and business opportunities will help us grow the economy and ensure a more prosperous future.

Mr. Speaker, the 19th Legislative Assembly has set an ambitious mandate, and because of the unexpected shift in priority to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have even less time to complete it. Advancing the mandate requires teamwork and collaborative partnerships to create the meaningful change we are all seeking. Every member of this Legislative Assembly plays an important role in our collective success. I have the full faith in Cabinet, Regular Members, along with our dedicated public service to meet our mandate commitments and work together for NWT residents.

Mr. Speaker, a fundamental part of our success as a government, and the future prosperity of our territory, depends on a productive and collaborative partnership with Indigenous, community and municipal governments. The decisions we make as a government must reflect our commitment to reconciliation and the affirmation and advancement of Indigenous rights and self-determination. We must continue to foster constructive and respectful government-to-government relationships with our Indigenous partners and to

seek ways to advance reconciliation, recognize and affirm Indigenous rights, and support expanded program and service delivery. We are leaders in reconciliation, and this will continue to be one of our most important priorities as a government.

The last year has laid bare the gaps in our society, and the impact of COVID-19 has dramatically revealed the inequities and vulnerabilities of the NWT. Mr. Speaker, these are our realities, and we will need to keep these top of mind as we work to close the gap between Northern and southern Canada that existed long before COVID-19. We must work toward resilient people and a resilient economy and we will continue to pursue infrastructure and economic development opportunities that provide sustainable benefits. The Government of the Northwest Territories is committed to finding ways to make things better for NWT residents. In order to achieve this, we need to build a strong partnership with Canada to take real action on those areas where northerners have said that more needs to be done.

We need a strong investment partner in Canada, Mr. Speaker, and one very concrete way the federal government can support economic recovery is by investing in our infrastructure needs. By investing in large-scale infrastructure projects, we can help bridge the substantial infrastructure gap that exists here in the NWT, as well as kick-start the territory's economic recovery. This is an ambitious request, but one that will benefit the North and ensure we have a future where our residents live in a more prosperous territory. It is about giving the economy the boost it needs and planning for the future.

Mr. Speaker, we all want a brighter future for NWT residents. It is why we are all here, to have a positive impact and ensure future generations can achieve success. This is no easy task, and we have a lot of work to do, but I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the House to achieve this.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.