

**REMARKS FOR BUDGET 2022  
CHESTER COOPER, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER,  
MINISTER OF TOURISM, INVESTMENTS & AVIATION,  
EXUMAS AND RAGGED ISLAND MP  
JUNE 15, 2022**

It is my honor and privilege to once again rise in this honorable House of Assembly on behalf of the people of Exuma, the Exuma Cays and Ragged Island.

I thank God for his Goodness and Mercies.

I thank Prime Minister Davis for this opportunity to serve at his pleasure and I congratulate him for the vision laid out in this budget communication, as Minister of Finance.

As has been established, this is the first substantive budget of this PLP administration.

It is my first substantive budget contribution as deputy prime minister and minister of tourism, investments and aviation.

And this will be my sixth substantive budget presentation as a member of this House.

I have been truly impressed with the quality of debate. Member after member focus on Hope and not Hurt, Programs and not Politics, Passion and not that Petty vitriolic nonsense that we had become accustomed to.

It truly is a New Day.

June 24, next week, will make five years to the day that I came to this House.

I won my seat in Parliament as one of four members of the Progressive Liberal Party to successfully contest the May 10, 2017 general election.

That date will likely be remembered in the collective consciousness of The Bahamas as perhaps one of our darkest days, as it ushered in the Minnis administration, who in my mind there is no doubt, displayed the worst performance of any administration in our history.

That's right the worst Prime Minister in the history of the modern Bahamas.

I sat here, and watched the bumbling and blame-casting and the pandering and the nonsense perpetrated by the last executive and endured many indignities for speaking truth and sense to power.

We were ridiculed by many opposite and treated most unfairly by the last speaker of this House of Assembly, who himself has earned his place in history right beside his Prime Minister Minnis.

But God is good.

We gained power in September of last year.

The election on September 16 was an historic one for Exuma.

In 2017, I won election with 104 votes.

Last September, I won with the largest margin of victory ever seen in Exuma, with more than 1,100 votes, receiving 3 times more vote opponents.

Ain't God good?

I am humbled by the faith the people of Exuma have displayed in me.

You had a lot of people elected to this House in 2017.

Go look for them now – one hit wonders. The member for Englerston warned them!

This will be my second consecutive term, a feat never experienced by some notable names in politics.

Yes. Twice I have been elected deputy leader of the PLP. I thank the beloved officers, members and Stalwart Councillor. I promise to continue to uphold the philosophies and core values of our founders.

The people of Exumas and Ragged Island know they're in good hands – safe, steady, sure hands – with Chester Cooper and the PLP.

As I said, there were only four of us in this House, and 35 of them.

But we held our own and then some – and here we are.

Now, I have the honor to have been appointed deputy prime minister.

And I have also been blessed to have been appointed minister of tourism, investments and aviation.

These are exciting times we live in.

And I am elated to work along with Prime Minister Philip Davis, who also suffered many unfair indignities by the other side.

When we signed on to this mission when I ran as deputy leader, and through the campaign and now as deputy prime minister, we committed to do big, transformative things.

And has been demonstrated, that is exactly what we are doing.

I committed to people across the country who I met across the country from MICAL to Abaco and Grand Bahama that I would serve them with dignity.

And intend to do just that.

I will never grow tired of thanking the people of Exuma and Ragged Island for their love and support.

They are the reason I am and here and they know that their faith in me is a reflection of my faith in them.

They have given me an opportunity to contribute to the national growth and development of this country I love so much.

They have given me chance to inspire hope to young people across the country from MICAL to Exuma to Grand Bahama.

I stand here as a testament to the possibility our country holds.

I grew up as poor boy in the fields of Forbes Hill, Exuma, one of 12 children battling armies mosquitoes, and catching fish for dinner and boiling green bananas as a side and gathering wood for my three-rock stove.

We have so many challenges today with some young men in our country.

But I want to say something today in the hopes that there is one soul listening that I can reach.

You may be poor, you may be young, and you may not have your father in your life and feel that the place I am speaking to you from seems impossible to reach.

I want you to know that I was poor and young and lost my father tragically, very early in life.

I came from the one of the smallest and most obscure communities in this country.

I want you to know, this is our country.

There is a seat at the table for YOU and YOU!

Our founding fathers fought for it so that we could make of it what we would.

If I can come from poverty and obscurity to reach one of the highest positions in this country, then so can you.

But you have to do it the right way.

Learn all you can, work hard, be honest, follow the law and have an abiding faith in God.

And there is nothing you can't do.

So when Prime Minister Davis also a man of a very humble start asked me to serve as his Deputy, we committed together to doing Big Transformative things for our people.

That is what New Day Governance will look like.

### **The budget**

Turning to the budget itself, it is aptly named 'The Way Forward'.

You know, in my time since becoming minister of tourism, I have learned this: If you don't tell your story, someone else will.

Therefore, I find it interesting – I didn't say shocking or surprising – but interesting that members opposite have been so fiercely critical of this budget.

They have no moral standing to make such criticism. The member for East Grand Bahama was the blue-eyed boy so to speak. The member for Marco City, sat at the table of collective responsibility. I find it laughable now that he has found his voice.



This is a budget that threads the needle of providing relief to the most vulnerable while shoring up our national systems and infrastructure with a view to spur growth and stop revenue leakages and loopholes.

This budget will inspire confidence in the business community and international markets.

Just last week, we placed nearly \$400 million in bonds on the international market and attracted favorable rates. In a tough market especially so for such small offering and emerging market issuers this is commendable and I commend the Minister of Finance for this achievement.

Yes we still have high levels of government debt, our debt service costs and still unsustainable and we are still engaged in deficit spending. We didn't get here overnight though. We have endured many natural disasters that we had to fund over the years. But this budget paves the Way Forward.

We are laying the foundation for growth in the tourism, agriculture, blue, green, orange industries, carbon market and digital assets industry.

We are increasing efficient tax collection and streamlining the process to establish new business and funding of small business for young entrepreneurs to grow the economy and create wealth.

We are aggressively pursuing credible foreign direct investments.

When we source debt through bonds in the local and international markets we have to convince bondholders that we have the wherewithal and commitment to progress along the path our forecasts set out.

And that is what this budget does.

Our focus must be on ensuring that we meet our revenue targets.

And I am satisfied that the measures outlined in the budget will achieve this.

A key component in achieving the revenue targets is ensuring revenue growth through economic growth.

And I can tell you as minister of tourism and investments, that's where our thinking and our actions are aimed.

I talked about this while in opposition – it's the economy, it's the economic growth, it's the economy.

I am happy that the Prime Minister has assigned to me a portfolio where I can assist in driving economic growth.

Major problems can become simple stumbling blocks when the economy is firing on all cylinders and minor problems can become mountains when you find the revenue base has shrunk.

We have to grow the economy through foreign and domestic investment.

There's a lot of money in the world and there are lots of people with money in The Bahamas.

The key is to create the right investment climate, the confidence in the government's ability to meet its projections and the ability to execute at all levels.

I hear the snide commentary of some of those on the other side that this administration is involved in needless travel.

But after a global pandemic and economic shockwaves and an uninspiring Prime Minister, we have to get out there and let the world know that The Bahamas is open for business.

I just came back from the Middle East, and I'll talk more about that today, but we made incredible connections on a trip that was mostly paid for by them.

But even if we paid for all it, in my estimation it was worth it.

Businesses works by creating connections and explaining your value proposition.

At some point, we have to elevate the level of thinking that we put out there for our people to pick up.

We can't all hide in silos because we don't want to make it seem like we're living too large.

I come from an insurance background, and if you sat in the office all day waiting for clients to come to you, you'd go out of business.

Nothing happens until something is sold.

Nothing happens until the deal is closed.

So we have to let the world know we're open for business and we want to attract meaningful investment to this country and open avenues for those in this country to invest and grow as well.

We have so far approved close to \$2.5 billion in investments.

We have to be strategic in growing tourism as our bread and butter.

I'm from Exuma.

Tourism has rocketed the progress of my people forward.

What we're doing is getting more worthwhile investments on Exuma, so far we have approved \$700 million for Exuma.

And not only Exuma, more is coming on Grand Bahama, on New Providence, in MICAL, on Abaco, on Eleuthera, on San Salvador and Cat Island and I have Good News for Long Island too.

And we want more to come and more to generate wealth from within.

And we make no apologies for shoring up our bread and butter industry.

We're doing it by aggressively expanding room capacity.

We're looking at getting the Hilton reopened this year with the return of 288 rooms and 250-300 jobs hopefully in time for the winter season.

We're speaking with the owners of the Melia who are committed to renovating and re-opening and we should have a further announcement of this in due course. More rooms. More jobs.

We have the Grand Lucayan on track to open fully by 2025, with 2,000 construction jobs in the meantime and 1,000 jobs when fully opened.

That will be almost 2000 rooms.

And we're getting \$100 million for the property.

We got construction going on the Carnival Cruise Port after years of stalling under the last administration. Very little happened in 4 years. In four months we got the project started.

All you have to do is go to any Grand Bahamian to understand what that means for their economy.

We promised the people of Grand Bahama that we would fix their economy and we are doing just that.

We are working on getting Club Med reopened on San Salvador with as well.

The prime minister can tell you what that means for the people of that island.

The Wynn Resort will be open in November with nearly 100 suites.

Sandals Royal Bahamian is back on stream with 400 rooms and 900 jobs.

Sandals is also investing further at the Royal Bahamian, Sandals Island, Fowl Cay and at Sandals Emerald Bay.

We support their very bullish outlook for the future.

We're encouraging vacation rentals.

We're encouraging events and entertainment with the proper health protocols.

We have regattas back once again.

We're hosting CARIFTA next year.

We have the Bahamas Games back on track.

And we have the IAAF relays set to come back home. Bahama Hoops,

Battle at Atlantis, Conch Bowl, Bahamas Bowl, NACAC a myriad of other

event to bolster Sports Tourism in collaboration with my friend from

Garden Hills Hon. Minister of Youth, Sports & Culture.

We have the Nassau cruise port nearing completion.

We are improving airlift.

We're reaching out to new and emerging markets.

We're redeveloping airports.

We're ramping up marketing in global tourism sectors.



We're growing new industries like digital assets with companies like FTX and others.

It is exceedingly difficult to get a high-end rental property on New Providence.

There are people moving out of their condos to move back in with family, because the rental prices that those in the digital sphere are willing to pay them are too good to pass up.

This administration is building homes, creating ownership, fostering pride.

We are not just auctioning off service lots. That is the lazy way out.

We are building homes – putting people to work, getting people set to build generational wealth.

All this translates to economic activity and economic growth.

If I'm a domestic or local bond holder, I want to know and I do - that there is a robust growth strategy.

And that is what we have.

We also have to let the world know that it is safe amid a global pandemic to come to the many islands of The Bahamas.

And we also need Bahamians to be able to afford healthcare in their country and that they will be able to access healthcare services.

Nurses got a salary raise – and the teachers too.

We are sourcing more doctors and nurses to work in our hospitals.

As promised, we have provided free masks and free testing.

We are building a new hospital on New Providence and a \$150 million hospital on Grand Bahama.

That is what Progressive New Day Governance looks like

### **Revenue targets**

I don't know what the side opposite hopes to gain by harping on the fact that zero-rating on breadbasket items was eliminated to ensure

more uniform collection as was advised by VAT experts prior to its implementation.

You'll probably get a few headlines.

Same crew sat in the Cabinet, silent when they increased VAT by 60%.

But it's all more smoke and mirrors.

The Bahamian people know who is on their side, and it's not the people who hiked the VAT by 60 percent on almost every good and service in this country.

In this administration we understand that if you bring the cost of the goods down, then the VAT the consumer pays will also go down.

So we don't want to play games scaring people about VAT being implemented on breadbasket items.

We deliberately reduced the duty on over three-dozen widely consumed food items in order to ensure that the price would go down.

Already, you have the largest grocery chains announcing a drop in the prices of many items.

This is direct relief to the consumers and helps the economy grow through consumer confidence.

For the poor, the average working class Bahamian and the average business owner, we have not only implemented no new taxes, but we have lowered taxes by taking value-added tax from 12 percent to 10 percent.

We don't tax mum at the washhouse by hiking up VAT, we look to those who can afford to pay their fair share to do so.

We are now putting VAT on yacht charters.

Some people were antsy about this, but for too long these charter companies have been enjoying our waters, catching our fish, using our resources and environment without paying what is commensurate to keep our environment clean and safe.

I've attended major boat shows in the US and I can tell you that this is not a major point of concern for most yacht charter companies.

We are also imposing penalties for the rental of boats without licenses.

This creates a great difficulty for many different agencies in our country.

No license often means no insurance and no guarantee that the vessels are safe.

It also is grossly unfair to those who go through the process of registering their boats.

And there will also be penalties for those who rent cars without a proper license to do so.

People who invest in their car rental businesses and go through the proper channels are only asking the government for basic fairness.

We are going to collect VAT on the cost of vacation rentals.

It is only fair that they are subject to taxation on the entire rental cost as are hotels and guesthouses.

In terms of real property tax, we are expanding the exemptions on VAT for home ownership.

This means more people who are building or buying their first home will be helped in the process for homeownership.

And we are not targeting the rich by raising the cap on real property tax.

We are saying the system was not equitable in that those whose homes have tremendous value were paying the same rate as those who had homes that were valued far less.

So, yes, we raised the cap from \$60,000 to \$120,000.

And before the other side attempts to sow confusion, let me say that your home has to be worth just shy of \$20 million to get a \$120,000 property tax bill.

We cannot seriously believe that an extra \$60,000 per year is going to be a great headache for someone who owns a \$20 million home.

However, the government of The Bahamas needs the revenue, build roads, schools and social services.

### **Cost of living**

At the same time, we want to do all we can to make sure Bahamians can afford to live and live safely in The Bahamas.

If there is one thing that keeps me up at night is the increasing prices as being experienced in the rest of the world. The supply chain issues brought on by covid and the challenges being wrought by the war in the Ukraine continue to present this challenge.

Your government has responded with significant reductions in customs duties, translating positively at the cash registers.

Your government responded through significant support for BAMSI.

This means increased enforcement of price controls.

This means an increase in the minimum wage for public servants, with the private sector to follow.

We are investing in our police force, defense force and correctional services to attack this crime issue from all angles.

This includes an increase in social services assistance.

This includes a lump sum of \$500 for pensioners and those who were receiving unemployment assistance and for vendors on Grand Bahama.

This includes an investment of \$10m in Catastrophic Health Care.

We're investing \$50 million in small businesses to help entrepreneurs fulfill their dreams.

We're establishing a Universal Service Fund that will give exemptions and incentives for telecoms providers to put fiber and 5g technology in the Family Islands.



And Family Islands are going to get back 10 percent of the taxes they generate to in order to spur development.

When I campaigned in 2017, I said Exuma was contributing significantly to the consolidated fund but getting very little back. For the very first time we are doing something about it with the family island development fund.

We are investing in affordable home ownership.

And we are reforming the energy with cleaner and more affordable energy.

We've reduced duty on electric vehicles to 10 percent.

We approved a 650 megawatt \$85m investment in solar farm.

Reduced the tax burden on churches, charities, lodges and building societies so they can put that money back in communities as they often stand in the gap for our people.

## **Food security**

And this includes making sure we can feed ourselves.

My friend from South & Central Eleuthera who seconded this debate made a pivotal landmark speech for Agriculture & Marine resources and he is doing a phenomenal job as minister of agriculture and fisheries.

We are providing direct and ancillary support to fisherman and farmers through subsidies and additional concessions.

We are investing over \$6 million in food security initiatives, not only so that food is more affordable, but so Bahamians can make money in that industry. Its also about jobs, ownership, national pride and feeding ourselves.

With his his resolve and competence, I am confident that the Minister will have something to show at the end of his term as Minister for Agriculture.

He is not just talk. He is doer you see. So when we question his track record. When we say Where is the Beef? He will have more to show than just big pretty posters, flow charts and articulate speeches.

We different from dem you see!

This is what Productive New Day Governance looks like.

In our Blueprint for Change committed to “fostering unprecedented levels of growth” in the Bahamian economy.

We foreshadowed the growth and expansion of the Blue, Green, and Orange economies.

And we are progressively and aggressively making this commitment a reality.

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**The state of tourism**

Regarding the state of tourism in The Bahamas, it is strong.

Yesterday there were 20,000 passengers in Prince George Docks and the ships are running 107% occupancy, and Bay Street is buzzing and vendors and merchants and employees are making money.

This is what a New Day looks like.

Our airports are buzzing. No space on the aprons in Exuma, and North Eleuthera and Abaco.

We are processing 10,000 passengers a day at NAD. I want to thank Vernice Walkine and her team for their management and for making it look easy.

This is what a new day looks like.

Now, when it comes to Grand Bahama I recall how depressing GBI and the Port Lucaya.

I visited Port Lucaya Market Place. I was brought to tears by what I saw that day. The place was dead. People carried their foreclosure letters and eviction notices in their purses.

The Minister for GB and I travelled and met with the leaders of all of the major cruiseline.

We were intentional and deliberate.

We Showed them the possibilities of things to do in GBI. We asked them to make more calls to Freeport. We asked them to get the passengers off the ships. We ramped up the activities and entertainment at the Market Place.

I say to the Minister for GB your hard work, strategic focus, empathy, love and compassion for your people is paying off .

Now Grand Bahama is abuzz!

Saw photos yesterday of Taino Beach, Maxxi's and Port Lucaya MarketPlace. Pictures paint a thousand words.

I heard from Lorenze McKenzie, Phillipa Burrows, Janessa McKinney, Dorothy Bain and Monica Russel and I send a shout out to Daphne "Big Momma" Nixon.

They say things already better and happy days almost hear again.

From the near-death experience of GBI.

On Monday, we welcomed more than 4,000 visitors with more than 3,000 leaving the Carnival Magic.

Tuesday the Norwegian Sky.

Wednesday Carnival Glory

Friday we have the Carnival Legend.

Money in the pockets for taxi drivers, tour operators, vendors, artists & artisans, restaurants and retail.

This is what CARING New Day Governance looks like.

But we can do so much more.

As I said earlier, we recognize that FDI continues to be the fastest way to grow our economy.

We need to find a way to grow our economy consistently by at least 5% to generate the revenues and jobs we need to support our economy

and our people, including thousands of students graduating from high-school this month.

We have seen tourism rebound to levels that are similar to 2019 records but we are still not there yet.

UNWTO, WTTC and Forward Keys predict....

This is due to numerous factors that might be obvious but are critical to how we move forward.

The rules regarding air travel and the changing guidelines have reshaped the airline landscape.

And we have had to adjust. We will continue to do so.

Our goal is to encourage more flights in our key markets so that we can get more people here safely, quickly and affordably, whilst protecting public health.

Yes I support the review of travel testing rules. We must reduce the friction as we ramp up for the summer months.

I am pleased to announce that we are eliminating the Travel Health Visa effective next Wednesday June 22<sup>nd</sup>.

In addition to international airlines we are also engaging the locally based airlines.

I just recently announced that Western Air has agreed to fly a Ft. Lauderdale to Freeport route this summer and Bahamasair will fly more flights from Ft. Lauderdale to Freeport as well.

And on November 10, an inaugural Bahamasair flight will be direct from Charlotte, North Carolina to Freeport.

We have seen Canada opening up, as well as London and Europe and we are encouraged that by early fall, we could actually see arrival numbers surpass 2019 from some markets.

One of the major goals we plan to achieve is to double the number of stopover visitors to The Bahamas in three years.

Simply put, they spend more.

To do this, we need more airports, we need more flights, and we need more rooms.



If we look at the overall picture, we get less of the market share of Caribbean tourism than we did 20 years ago. Compared to our counterparts in the Caribbean we are losing ground.

**In 1995 we had over 13 percent of Caribbean arrivals but only five percent in 2018.**

In this regard, we have become somewhat of a victim of our own success in that regional competitors have made huge investments in tourism after witnessing our growth.

We plan to reverse the trend of shrinking Caribbean market share in the next five years.

To do this, we have to intensify the focus on marketing and promotions.

We want to increase The Bahamas' visibility and ability to capture the attention of new and past visitors.

We want to promote destination value and accessibility, including the range of accommodation options, diversity of islands, authentic

experiences, and calendar of sports, events, entertainment, and activities. We will work with major entertainment companies.

## FILM INDUSTRY

And we plan to promote at-home travel - festivals and events, vacations, and getaways.

This will boost family island travel and encourage visitors to visit more than one of our 16 destinations.

Our new strategy is based on the business model of maximizing reach, marketing new experiences, expanding segments, and fostering collaboration with industry stakeholders.

With inflation and fuel costs rising, travel has become more expensive, but so far it hasn't proven to be a great detractor when stacked up against still pent up demand.

And we are looking at the elimination of test requirements for vaccinated travelers to The Bahamas.

The cruise market is also a critical focus for us.

When the new cruise port in Nassau is complete, we will be able to host six of the world's largest ships at a time at a world-class port.

As you know, there is spend of more than \$300 million in upgrades here and this will be completed by end of December 2022.

We hope that this improvement can be contagious.

I have been very candid in how we want to drive the redevelopment of Downtown Nassau, so that it can become one of the best destination attractions in the region.

Restore the historic charm and make it one of the most attractive places in the country—the best representation of The Bahamas—providing a unique experience for visitors and Bahamians.

The goal is to have a safe, rejuvenated, economically viable Downtown that can once again be a real economic driver.

We need investments downtown in entertainment, restaurants, night life, and boutique resorts and residential.

Working with Ministry of Works and the OAG, We have already torn down the first building on Cumberland Street.

We have three more demolitions in sight right now.

Let me repeat that!

We have three more demolitions in sight as we speak.

Working is progressing with the Office of The Attorney General and the Ministry of Works on legislation to manage the city.

One thing is certain, the status quo won't remain.

There will be incentives and consequences

We are actively engaged in attracting investors to downtown and there is interest.

## **GRAND BAHAMA**

We promised the people of Grand Bahama that we would revitalize and rebuild their island.

Big things are happening. Real things for real people!

- i) Grand Lucayan Resort

- ii) Carnival Cruise Port
- iii) Revitalized Port Lucaya Market Pace & Marina
- iv) New Airport with Returned Pre-Clearance. I am pleased to advise that as a result of the RFP process we have three credible suitors for the redevelopment of a world class GBIA. We expect construction to be completed by January 2025.
- v) Significant airlift boost from Bahamasair, WesternAir and our other Airline Partners
- vi) Sale and revitalization of many of the abandoned projects through our Shovel-Ready Initiative to include Ginn Sur Mer, Harcourt Properties, Int'l Bazaar and Xanadu.

These initiatives will mean a significant number of tourist arrivals there and change the economic prospects for Grand Bahama for many years.

The jobs and tourism receipts will have knock-on effects in countless ways in the coming years.

In our minds, we really are just getting started with Grand Bahama.

We plan to continue to attract big investors to Grand Bahama and there are some in the pipeline.

The \$500m investment in the GB Shipyard and the sale of Equinor will bring significant boost to the industrial sectors. We will fast track these out of the pipeline as well.

All will be buttressed by the new hospital already announced by MOHW and the MFGB.

At no time in history have I been more optimistic about Grand Bahama than right now.

GBI, your Gov't is working for you!

This is what New Day Governance Looks like.

## **FAMILY ISLANDS**

We will complete the new new airports at Exuma, North Eleuthera, a beautiful new airport at Deadman's Cay Long Island, and a new FBO and 5,000 ft runway Black Point Exuma.

All of these airports will be facilitated through public private partnerships

The GHC airport will open shortly with new opportunities for jobs, and retail.

We have redesigned the New Bight Airport we will shortly engage interested parties for a PPP and we expect construction to begin early 2023. Cat Island, your MP is working for you.

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## **BAHAMAS INVESTMENT AUTHORITY**

In terms of investment, which goes hand in hand with tourism, we have already restructured the National Economic Council.

This has already reaped significant results.

In the UNCTAD recently released world Investment report 2021 recently. It showed that FDI inflows for 2021 fell 60% \$360m the lowest level in five years. This is a clear indicator that the world had lost confidence in the FNM governance, or that its policy makers showed

little focus or frankly did not understand the significance of FDI or simply did not know what they were doing. Or All of the above.

We have also already started the transformation of the Bahamas Investment Authority.

We're restructuring it by revamping the organisational structure for swift and transparent investment approvals and investment promotion.

The finished product will be called InvestBahamas.

We are looking at that launching in September of this year.

As we speak, we are working to eliminate the BIA backlog and establish a digital portal for lawyers and investors to track their investment status.

We have seen an encouraging level of serious enquiries in various industries: Tourism, marinas, logistics, renewable energy, maritime, dry dock & ship repairs and agri-business.

As was stated, we have approved \$2.5 billion in investments so far.

\$700m in Exuma

\$131m in Abaco



\$137m in Eleuthera

\$400m in Mayaguana

We have in the pipeline ready for approval a \$250m project for South Long Island comprised of a boutique resort, entertainment water park and boutique resort. And I am particularly excited by the renewed interest I see in Long Island. We will work to shepherd these projects out of the pipeline.

[You know my mother is from Deadman's Cay Long Island, I assure the people of Long Island that this counts for something. Their economy has suffered neglect and we will work with investors to drive economic activity].

And we anticipate at least \$5 billion to be approved in year one.

We are also establishing a Social Responsibility Fund into which every investor will be encouraged to contribute at least 1 percent of the investment to social causes, entrepreneurship and the Tourism Development Corporation.

As I mentioned we are undertaking a Shovel Ready Projects Initiative (SRPI) – in which all large and small resorts and projects that were not completed or failed, we will match with appropriate investors.

This live database will present these projects with all approvals subject only to financing and due diligence on the investor.

We are also creating a Digital Assets/Crypto Desk to fast track and facilitate such industry to support the international buzz and energy already being spearheaded by our beloved Prime Minister.

We are undertaking a review of concessions being offered for investment to see where we can rationalize them whilst ensuring that we are competitive. We must not give away the shop to investors for a bowl of porridge.

We assure the Bahamian people that we understand the mission.

**Tourism numbers**

As far as numbers, we are still processing the May data and hope to have that within the next 10 days.

I can say that foreign air and sea arrivals to The Bahamas from January to April this year totaled 1,933,351 people.

Of that number, just over 460,000 visitors were stopover visitors.

In April alone, we had 586,574 visitors by air and sea.

Air and sea arrivals through April year-to-date were up by 946.8 percent over the same period of 2021.

I will say that another way, there has been an almost 1,000 percent increase in arrivals to The Bahamas for the first four months of this year, compared to the first four months of last year.

There are multiple reasons for this, but I just wanted to put that difference in perspective.

Air arrivals for April year to date were up by 186.1 percent over the same period of 2021.

Cruise arrivals for April 2022 were up because most of the major cruise lines had already resumed service to The Bahamas and there had been very few cruise arrivals for the same period of 2021.

Royal Caribbean Cruise lines, Carnival Cruises, Celebrity Cruises, and Norwegian Cruises, had resumed service to The Bahamas after more than a year of absence due to the global pandemic, and other cruise lines had also done the same

From January to April, 2022 there were 1,434,850 cruise arrivals. Over 436,000 of that number was in April alone.

Of course, there is no comparison to last year for that period as there were essentially no arrivals.

As far as demographics are concerned, between January to April year-to-date, 390,241 were from the US, 15,093 were from Canada.

We had 5,158 from the UK, followed by France, Germany, Jamaica, Brazil and Mexico.

The lockdowns and flight restrictions that Canada had in place since the pandemic started caused a significant fall in stopovers between 2020 and 2021 but in the first four months of 2022 recovery had begun from this market

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted stopover arrivals from European countries that were experiencing lockdowns and flight restrictions which extended into 2021.

In the first four months of 2022, however, stopover visitor arrivals were well on the way to recovery from this market.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a decline in stopovers to the island but by 2021, recovery of the Latin American market for The Bahamas had begun and this trend continued into the first four months of 2022.

Between January to April 2022, 51.4 percent of visitors from all regions were repeat visitors,

During the first four months of the year, 69.5 of all stopover visitors came to The Bahamas primarily for a vacation, with 13.2 percent coming for weddings and honeymoons, and 3.8 percent for business.

Between Jan. to Apr. YTD 2022, stopover visitors from Africa stayed the longest at 23.6 nights and those from the US 6.5 nights.

The average length of stay for most regions increased in 2021 compared to 2020 and 2019.

Through April 2022, the average length went back down but stayed higher than the 2019 levels for the period.

From January to April 2022, the average length of stay of stopover visitors to The Bahamas was 6.8 nights

## **Florida**

What I found very interesting at my time in tourism is the fact is that we have tens of millions of people living in Florida 30 minutes away and we get less than 500,000 tourists from this market in a good year.

Florida has a population of 22 million and is a tourism mecca, receiving 122.4 million visitors in 2021.

In 2021, Miami International Airport handled 13.2 million international travelers and is the hub for American Airlines, one of the largest producers of air seats to The Bahamas.

Florida residents and the millions of visitors who vacation in Florida each year are key sources of growth to our destination.

Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and Orlando are the major gateway cities for point-to-point travel. They are also strategic connecting hubs for European and Latin American stopover visitors to The Bahamas.

While proximity is our competitive edge, we must fix the cost of getting there by air. We will capitalize on our proximity to this large source market by exploiting the lucrative Boating, Diving, and Private Aviation Segments.

There are over 900K registered boats in Florida and more than 14K active private pilots.

Florida is also home to the second-largest number of newly certified divers in the United States.

Needless to say, we are developing our relaunch in this market as well.

We plan to connect with Floridians through a series of lifestyle events that allow for direct engagement and data collection.

We will launch a series of coordinated consumer, trade and vertical events. My colleague John Pinder will speak more to our strategy around Boating, Diving, Fishing, yatching and Private Aviation.

We plan to re-establish key strategic partnerships with boat manufacturers to create opportunities to reach and encourage existing and new boater owners to travel to The Bahamas.

Strengthen our Fixed Base Operator and Marina gateway program and partnerships to reach and assist private pilots and boaters with travel planning.

These gateway partners are in strategic locations in Florida.



We are going to leverage the power of our vertical ambassadors' influence as experts on our destination to promote proximity, safety, and the amazing experiences in our destination.

These are key to building two-center vacation offerings from Europe, Middle East, Latin America, and Canada.

We will leverage the combined marketing strength of our partners like the promotion boards, hotel stakeholders, and transportation partners to create coordinated communications plans to drive demand from Florida audiences.

In 2021, Miami-Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach-Ft. Pierce, Orlando-Daytona Beach-Melbourne, Tampa-St. Petersburg (Sarasota) and Ft. Myers-Naples were the top metro areas in Florida searching for the keyword 'Bahamas.' Where we get 500,000 hits per month.

These top metros and cities will aid our data-driven strategic decision approach.

We plan to expand our reach in Florida by leveraging the traffic to Bahamas.com with display ad retargeting technology.

This hyper-focused approach will allow us to serve up highly relevant ads to unique site visitors across multiple devices to reinforce our messaging.

And we will establish expanded ad campaigns with travel intent partners like TripAdvisor, Kayak, and others to tap into their Florida audiences, so The Bahamas is well-positioned for potential travelers.

We will look far and wide with new emerging market. But you will see a heavy focus on Florida, right next door.

## **Film Industry**

I am pleased to announce an initiative by my Ministry to partner with International Film Producers, to launch in earnest a film industry in the Bahamas. This will provide innumerable opportunities

Firstly we will build capacity in terms of training to all Bahamians passionate about the film industry, which will begin to equip us to build a robust and competitive industry.

We have already met with several renowned film producers.

In the first instance this move will increase the number of TV Shows, Documentaries and Film scenes that will not only create jobs, spur investments in the space but importantly showcase our incomparable islands, attractive resorts and touristic sites, benefiting our transportation industry and providing opportunities for our Bahamians to work along in many different capacities, showcasing their skills and professionalism.

### **Tourism developments**

In terms of what we can further to do at home, we are developing a system to track domestic tourism –it will monitor, promote and, most importantly, track domestic investments. We will launch new programs, relaunch old ones like Hip-toHop and heavily support regatta and events.

A word on Sloop Sailing the National Support. Its launch and its potential. Tours on Tida Wave etc

The Tourism Development Corporation has several initiatives.

We have been giving lip service to linkages for decades.

It will leading Bahamian investment in tourism and the tourism product - authentic products, tours & experiences, along with boutique resorts.

Blue print foreshadowed purchasing a % of its goods from local suppliers.

It will provide jobs, including 100 life guards.

It will spur entrepreneurship by working with partners.

It will launch an authentically Bahamian incubation center on Bay Street.

It is working with the AMMC to develop historical sites.

It is focused on getting cruise passengers off the ships.

And it will be creating partnerships and linkages – not more lip service.

It will help grow the vacation rental market by incentivizing and encouraging vacation rentals with support through SBDC and the BDB and Bahamas Venture Capital Fund

The Nassau Paradise Island Tourism Promotion Board will also be looking at the recalibration on the hotel levy to make it more equitable, ensure collection and to manage the distribution of the fees.

We are also creating linkages with some of the largest art, events and entertainment agencies in the world to bring events to The Bahamas, in partnership with local artist and promoters in the Orange Economy.

This will help in cementing GBI in particular as the events and entertainment hub for The Bahamas.

**Trip to MIDDLE EAST**

As I said earlier, I recently headed a mission to the State of Qatar and The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia along with Minister Halkitis to engage in matters of mutual interests and bi-lateral talks around tourism, investments and aviation.

In Qatar, I met with Prime Minister Sheik Khalid Althani, Minister of Transport Jassim Suif Ahmed, Acting President of Qatar Civil Aviation Authority Mohamed Faleh Al-Hajri, Qatar Airways CEO and Head of Tourism Board Akbar Al Baker, Chief Commercial Officer Qatar Airways Group Thierry Antinori.

While there, we agreed, in principle, to enter into memoranda of understanding to establish a technical training agreement between The Bahamas and Qatar Civil Aviation Authority for continuous technical exchange.

Qatar Airways (one of the most successful and profitable airline in the world) offered, at their expense, technical assistance/consultation to Bahamasair to assess economic benefit and offer recommendations for

improvement of business model. They will consider a hub and spoke system.

I can tell you that we have locally formed an Aviation Task Force for the creation of Exuma as a hub by 2023.

Qatar's Ministry of Transport and Qatar Aeronautical Academy are to enter into technical cooperation with the Department of Aviation (Bahamas Aeronautical Academy) for technical training to support air traffic training, civil aviation, engineering and flight operations and other areas, with the institute to launch by early 2023.

Qatar Tourism Board has agreed to enter into a marketing and promotional partnership with The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism around working with destination management companies; offering tour packaging services etc.

Bahamasair and Qatar Airways plan on entering into an interline agreement, to be able to book straight true from Doha to North Eleuthera for example without touching your checked bags.

It should be noted that Qatar is a member of the OneWorld Alliance and offers great connections via American Airlines and British Airways that can easily be worked into bringing more visitors to The Bahamas.

Our vision is to ultimately establish the Bahamas as a hub for passengers and cargo for Latin America and Caribbean Markets and onward to the USA strategically harnessing our pre-clearance.

And it should be noted that we have also extended an invitation for a delegation from Qatar to visit The Bahamas.

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, we met with the CEO of the tourism development fund, the minister of tourism, the minister of investments and several other high ranking government officials.

The kingdom will share technical assistance and support on tourism development for the Saudi market for the Bahamas. The Bahamas will assist the kingdom through technical cooperation on workforce talent development sharing some key programs – BahamaHost and People to People, for example.



We will be exporting some of our expertise.

We will enter into an MOU on technical cooperation and cruise tourism development.

The Bahamas plans to enter into a technical exchange with the kingdom on tourism Marine Protected Areas and sustainable tourism.

The Bahamas and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia plan to enter into a joint-marketing campaign around the promotion of tourism between both countries.

Bahamasair and Saudi Airlines also plan to enter into an interline agreement.

We have agreed to enter into an MOU on the establishment of a Sustainable Tourism Global Center.

The Bahamas is to sit on STGC Advisory Board and we have designated tourism professional Kristal Bethel to lead this initiative on our behalf

as we partner with Saudi Arabia. This work will support advocacy already driven by the prime minister around climate change.

We will advance this agenda via the UNWTO, as we make the case for small island developing states dependent on tourism..

It is distressing that no such entity came to support vulnerable small countries dependent on tourism during Dorian and COVID.

We must leverage our connections in the world.

There must be more equity for small nations who are impacted by the actions of huge corporations and major countries.

Also, we extended an official invitation for a delegation from Saudi Arabia to visit The Bahamas.

We are also looking at increasing our footprint in private aviation in that region.

*The Middle East & North Africa Business Aviation Association (MEBAA) will have a major show in Dubai later this year that could prove fruitful for The Bahamas.*

From a business perspective, this will create opportunities for business, private and commercial travel to The Bahamas.

With the demand for private travel to and from the Middle East, The Bahamas will attract some of the wealthiest corporate jet owners through in person interacting with key corporate and government stakeholders.

The strategy aims to establish sustainability in the Middle East tourism sector and ensure a more resilient, inclusive, carbon-neutral and resource-efficient tourism in aerospace which is a target for Governments seeking to upgrade their economies.

This will be another opportunity to showcase The Bahamas and the overall tourism product to the Middle East business aviation market.

It will potentially attract high net worth private aviation investors to The Bahamas, which could yield potential investment in real estate, infrastructural and other projects in The Bahamas.

Meantime, we are developing a National Strategy for Aviation in order to build capacity.

We continue to negotiate with our neighbors on the southern coast for the management of the airspace in our southern region.

We are looking at bringing on 50 new air traffic controllers.

Over time we will build capacity in aviation, navigation, engineering and aviation regulation.

## **Gaming**

Gaming continues to be rebost.

Yet we continue to see opportunities, I also wanted to note that

Gaming Board is preparing the Corporate Social Investment Initiative to

be funded by Gaming House operators to foster social responsibility in terms of gaming.

We expect that One percent of gaming house revenues are to be allocated to social causes, education, sports, entrepreneurship and tourism development.

We plan on getting that started with the establishment of a Corporate Social Investment Initiative Administrative Committee and a Corporate Social Investment Initiative Fund.

These are in train and we will update the Bahamian people further these development soon.

### **Exumas and Ragged Island**

And I would be remiss today if I did not update the people of Exumas and Ragged Island on what is happening in our constituency. In fact I want to share 15 pieces of Good News!

1) We have major road works coming with 45 miles of road being redone at a cost of \$60 million. We will look at the side roads of Rolle Town, Mt. Thompson, Boulevard Road and Alien Town. My thanks to the honorable minister of public works for that.

2) Little Exuma will get running water beginning this year.

We want to thank the honorable minister of public works again, as well as the honorable member for South Beach who is parliamentary secretary in the Ministry of Works.

3) Barraterre will get potable water too.

That will be facilitated through a public private partnership.

Thanks to the minister of works and the parliamentary secretary at works who helped facilitate that through a public private partnership.

4) Work on our **international airport** will resume shortly. Thanks to the Minister of Finance.

You know, interestingly, the FNM, just before elections, started to build the airport with no plan for funding.

And didn't even invite me to the groundbreaking. So, I showed up anyway.

They had seven (7) shovels

The contactor was still owed \$10 million by the way.

The people saw it for what it was recognized that it was my advocacy and agitation that would finally bring about the airport the FNM shelved then cynically started with no plan as an election ploy.

We will fix it and we will finish it.

6)George Town will get a new primary school

7)Staniel Cay's school will be completed by August 2022.

8)Ragged School is well advanced and we are preparing for school in September 2022.

I want to thank the Hon Minister for Education.

9)**The Forbes Hill Cultural Center** is significantly on its way to completion.

This will serve as an incubation center for Bahamian products and small businesses like spas, microbreweries, cafes/restaurants, salt harvesting and reselling, honey, coconut products, candle makers, kayaking and water sports.

Thanks to many private sector donors and residents and the Forbes Hill Association .

We're going to create a brand synonymous with authenticity – Made in Little Exuma.

In addition to that, the cultural center will also be home to a farmer's market.

It was also serve as a fully equipped hurricane shelter with a generator and hurricane impact windows.

We will have a ribbon cutting this summer in August.

You are all invited. This is going to be a big big deal in this small town.

10)We are also planning on breaking ground on the Exuma Youth Empowerment Center by the third quarter of this year.



It will be a sustainability and resilience center run on solar power.

It will be a green economy center partner with NGOs like BREEF, a sailing club and a rowing club.

It will also serve as a boat building center and have meeting spaces for non-profit organizations.

It will also be a center for the creative arts inclusive of modern recording studio.

We will also be breaking ground on another hurricane shelter by mid-2024.

10) There are some exciting developments with our Restore George Town Project that we will be announcing soon. Process outlining plans for a new town center area of Navy Base, office complex, new school, new port, heritage and cultural site.

11) Our eVision 2030 plan to unlock the potential of Exumas & Ragged Island is also continuing.

12) Also, we are relaunching our job bank next week.

12) And we encourage everyone who is on the market for a job to register. If you want to work we want to match you to the opportunities available. My commitment is that there be full employment on the island of Exuma.

13) We are also planning to establish a dialysis unit and have a fully functioning mini hospital before the end of this year to eliminate need for persons to travel to Nassau

We want to encourage the outsourcing of the management of the mini clinic. Thanks to the hon Minister of Health.

15) You would know that we built and commissioned an airport terminal in Ragged Island in six to eight weeks from start to finish.

Launched in my first days in office as DPM, again no government money.

The school, clinic, and administration buildings are also being completed.

14) In Black Point and Staniel Cay we anticipate newly built clinics supported by a PPP. Thank the Minister for Health & Wellness.

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15) Members of this House may or may not know that each year I have donated my salary to causes in the constituency, like the Louise Cooper Scholarship Fund, the Exuma Pride Project and the Forbes Hill Cultural Center.

This year, I'll be putting it towards developing entrepreneurship. All \$28k for MP salary goes back to the people of Exuma and Ragged Island.

So, we'll work with the Bahamas Empowerment Fund so we can develop grants for new businesses, and foster partnerships with BDB and the SBDC and the private sector. New Bahamian entrepreneurs , means new jobs, creation.

**Conclusion**

As I close today, I want the Bahamian people to remember that this budget is about relief, but it also about growth. It's about economic growth. Its about inspiring confidence and renewing optimism.

Growing our economy, growing tourism, growing investments, growing aviation and growing revenues so that we can meet our commitments and brace ourselves for future shocks and future possibility.

We are deepening our commitment to the areas which we already flourish, and we are branching out to increase our capacity to empower Bahamians.

I support this budget and this is demonstrative of the collaborative "Blueprint for Change" an initiative I had the pleasure to lead and thoughtful approach the Davis-Cooper administration delivers.

I want to thank TeamTourism, TeamAviation and TeamInvestments and the scores of dedicated professionals who work so hard but often go unsung.

Thanks to the Civil Aviation Authority Bahamas Air Navigation Services Authority, Nassau Flight Services, NAD, the Airport Authority, Bahamasair, the Hotel Corporation, Tourism Development Corporation, The Gaming Board, and The Bahamas Investment Authority.

As always, I must thank the people of Exuma and Ragged Island for all their hard work and well wishes.

I must thank TeamCooper and the PLP Exuma Branch in that regard as it takes a lot of work to keep things running smoothly.

I also want to thank everyone who became a politically exposed person because of me and didn't sign up for it.

Janet Bostwick said at the recent luncheon to honor her "Politics in a brutal business. When you are in opposition your family and friends are victimized because of their associations. And when you are in government you are so worried about conflicts of interest that your family suffers still."

I want to thank my family – my wife Cecillia, Chelsea, Izak and Chloe.

We sometime underestimate the sacrifices that are made in the lives of our spouses and children.

I want them all to know that though it sometimes may not seem like it, I am doing this for you.

When good men, to whom God has given much, are called by their country, we have a duty to answer and do the best we can and pay it forward.

It's our obligation so to do.

May God the people of the Exumas and Ragged Island. And may God bless the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.