



CONTRIBUTION TO PARLIAMENT

BY

THE HON. I. CHESTER COOPER, M.P.

**DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND
MINISTER OF TOURISM, INVESTMENTS & AVIATION
AND MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT
FOR THE EXUMAS AND RAGGED ISLAND
2023/2024 BUDGET**

MONDAY, JUNE 19, 2023

Good morning Madame Speaker,

I rise today on behalf of the resilient people of the Exumas and Ragged Island to offer my unequivocal support to the 2023/2024 Budget.

I want to congratulate the Prime Minister on this budget and the many ways in which it shores up society and creates a brighter future for Bahamians who are here now and for generations to come.

Our Prime Minister is doing an incredible job in leading the fiscal affairs of this nation.

Before I proceed with my substantive remarks, I would be remiss if I did not wish all the men of this place and across the country a happy belated Father's Day. May God strengthen you as your families look to you to provide and protect, nurture and discipline.

On this day, I paid tribute to my own children for their resilience and their sacrifice and to all the young people across the country whom I have inspired in some way to do more and to go higher.

I have done much, but I count it a singular honor and my obligation to the next generation to be the best father that I can be.

Madam speaker, I am honored to have been given the opportunity to serve as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Tourism Investments and Aviation. Politics is sometimes a thankless and merciless existence. It is at those moments I am most grateful to have the love of my family. I thank my dear wife Cecillia for being a soldier, my children for their understanding and the men and women across this country from Grand Cay to Great Inagua and everywhere in between, who pray for me each day.

In a few weeks, we will celebrate 50 years as an independent nation.

And in that, to God we owe the glory, as it was the faith of the Bahamian people that first moved this mountain.

Nations are not merely born of documents and flags and ceremonies – nations are built.

Indeed, we have built this nation with our own hands – and we are exceedingly proud.

And for 70 years, the Progressive Liberal Party has concerned itself with the laser focus of nation building.

In the PLP we understand that nation-building is our duty.

It is because of the PLP that we had Majority Rule.

It is because of the PLP that we had independence.

It is because of the PLP that we have the underpinning focus on education, healthcare and national security that we do in this nation.

We are builders, who move this nation forward and raise towers on the foundation of the faith and work of our forefathers, who dared to risk it all for their country.

We pay tribute to our founders who always understood that nation building is serious business.

They did not risk it all so that we could all live lives of leisure, but so that we could have the freedom to determine our destiny by our capacity to harness our talents and dedicate ourselves to the hard work that builders face.

And though we may build structures, and mechanisms that deliver things faster and better, nothing God has ever tasked us to build will be as important as the families that men and women create that provide the backbone of this nation.

I say that to say, though I am a PLP, and proud of it, when I come to this House, I come to build The Bahamas, for all Bahamians.

The Prime Minister, my colleagues, and I, come to build a better environment for men, women and children to thrive in this country.

We come here to build better processes, craft sounder policies, offer more relief and address the ills that plague our people.

We want to protect those who are frail, empower those who are strong and make the way easier for those yet unborn.

A path that is easier than the way I had growing up in Forbes Hill, Little Exuma; easier than the way the Prime Minister had growing up in Old Bight, Cat Island.

Not because life must be easy, but because if builders do the work they should, life does not need to be unnecessarily hard.

I say all that to say, I know who I am – I am a Bahamian, as are we all.

And if what we do here does not build our country then why are we here at all?

This budget, Madame Speaker, builds a better Bahamas.

So, I come here with no agenda other than that.

I believe wholeheartedly that the Progressive Liberal Party is always the best party to govern The Bahamas, but I can determine when to put down my political sword.

So today, I have so much to cover, and there is so much going on with the work we are doing, that I have very little time to attack the FNM, as they seem to delight themselves in attacking us.

What we must always remember in this place is that we are here to serve the people, not our own egos.

So, I have no real time for that. Maybe just a little, but very little.

But what we got going on ain't got nothing to do with the FNM.

And honestly, Madame Speaker, it gets tiring talking about those who were so expert at losing.

We are about winning.

We want wins for the Bahamian people.

This budget is a win for investment in food security.

This budget is a win for children who will receive nourishment through the free school breakfast program.

This budget is a win for those who seek more affordable housing.

In this budget we have provided for new hospitals, upgraded clinics and new schools.

We have made major provisions for investments in national security and the safety of abused women and children.

And we have given some wins to our Family Islands with investment in infrastructure.

Your PLP government is working for you.

We are #JustGettingStarted.

MOTIA – the Engine:

I am delighted to have been given a ministry by the Honorable Prime Minister that puts me at the front-end of Business Development and Economic Growth.

My Ministry is largely responsible for driving revenues and economic growth.

Yes, tourism is the engine for the economy and the goose that lays the needed eggs but must also be seen to be the engine for National Development, the tool for innovation and the catalyst for Bahamian empowerment.

We must indeed do even more to leverage tourism to create wealth and to nurture new millionaire entrepreneurs.

Blueprint for Change

Leading into the 2021 Elections, I was most honored to be given the challenge by our party leader, now Prime Minister Davis, to lead the PLP's "Blueprint for Change" along with a distinguished team of party supporters.

Fundamental in all 11 sections of the 10-point plan was the theme "Bahamian Empowerment". I love to see it all coming to fruition bit by bit, ministry by ministry.

I am pleased to tell you that we are not only working for you, but we are delivering for you, and we are Just Getting Started.

- 1) **In Health:** We committed to a new hospital in GBI. We have broken ground and expect to advance it this fiscal year. In Health and Wellness, your government is working for you!
- 2) **In Education:** As promised, we completed a learning loss study and are working to turn around the harm done by the pandemic and the Minnis Administration. We are negotiating new contracts with teachers, recruiting more teachers and education faculty and new schools are on the way. Your government is working for you!
- 3) **In Agriculture:** We promised big transformative support for food security. We delivered the Golden Yolk Program, and we are providing levels of support for agriculture and fisheries never seen before! We gat a real Minister of Agriculture, who walks the walk and not just talking the talks. This Minister is working for you!
- 4) **In Housing:** We promised to make home ownership easier with a rent-to-own program and we have built and are building scores of affordable homes. Thanks to the honorable Minister from Elizabeth, we are demonstrating that Your Government is working for you!

- 5) **In Grand Bahama:** We promised compassionate social relief for the victims of Dorian. We brought the Beautiful Grand Bahama Program for many who were displaced, we extended the SERZ orders, and we passed the Evidence Amendment Act to make it easier for families to get closure. I tell you GB, your minister is working for you!
- 6) **In Youth Sports & Culture:** We launched the National Youth Guard and brought back the Bahamas Games as we promised we would. Your government is working for You!
- 7) **In the Family Islands:** We are driving infrastructure, upgrading airports, putting more money into local government and driving investment. This administration is working for you!
- 8) **In the Public Service & Labor:** Unrest used to be the order of the day under the Minnis administration. Since coming to office, we have demonstrated our friendship for Labor and executed more than 18 industrial agreements. The Bahamian people will not be seduced by poetic talks. You understand that the PLP is working for you!
- 9) **In Finance:** We promised to restore faith in public finances. Revenues are up. The economy is growing, and we are projecting the lowest budget

deficit in a decade. Your Minister of Finance, our beloved Prime Minister, never stops working for you.

AND WE JUST GETTING STARTED!

TOURISM

Madame Speaker, our tourism performance over this fiscal year, continues to shatter pre-pandemic levels and further positions The Bahamas among the regional and global leaders, in terms of overall tourism recovery.

And we are #JustGettingStarted.

At the end of April 2023, overall air and sea arrivals surpassed 2022 levels by 79 percent and exceeded the banner 2019 numbers by 32 percent.

Looking specifically at the numbers, between January to April 2022, we welcomed an overall 1.9 million visitors.

During that same period in 2019, we welcomed 2.7 million visitors.

During the same four-month period this year, we welcomed some 3.5 million visitors, with eight more months left.

On this current trajectory, we fully expect to shatter the much-touted historic 2019 overall visitor arrivals numbers by the end of the third quarter and will conservatively welcome well over 8 million visitors by the end of 2023.

And we are #JustGettingStarted.

Air stopover arrivals – heads in beds that stay longer and spend more – surpassed 2022 levels by 34 percent, and matched 2019 performance levels, pacing well ahead of overall global pre-pandemic recovery forecasts.

At some point within this fiscal year, we saw most of our islands experiencing their most historic monthly foreign air arrivals.

We are breaking records in Nassau/PI, South Andros, North Andros and the Berry Islands, Cat Cay, Cat Island, Eleuthera, Exuma and Long Island too.

If we analyze the major islands that have not reached full recovery, we will see that after being shut down for over two years, San Salvador air stopovers have now returned to 92 percent of its 2019 levels and is expected to end this year, also experiencing record air arrivals.

Grand Bahama air stopovers surpassed its 2022 levels by 70 percent and rebounded to over 80 percent of pre-pandemic levels.

However, when we combine total air and sea arrivals into Grand Bahama, total visitor arrivals exceeded 2022 levels by 137 percent, and overall visitor arrivals have soared to 91 percent of 2019 pre-pandemic/Dorian levels.

Abaco air stopover arrivals have exceeded 2022 levels by 70 percent and recorded 75 percent of pre-pandemic/Dorian airlift.

However, when we look at Abaco's overall air and sea arrivals, you will see that overall visitor arrivals surpassed 2022 figures by 72 percent and at the end of April, Abaco's overall visitor arrivals were at 99 percent of the 2019 figures.

Cruise arrivals exceeded 2022 levels by 95 percent and surpassed the record-breaking 2019 numbers by 44 percent.

In short, tourism is booming, and the numbers have never been better.

And we are just getting Started.

Yes, there was pent-up demand for travel.

Yes, we benefit from our proximity to North America.

However, the sustained growth that we are seeing is due to the coordinated efforts of many people in the Ministry of Tourism, Aviation and Investment and the agencies under its remit.

I am grateful to Team Tourism – Director General Latia Duncombe, our stakeholders, promotion boards, hotel partners, airline partners and the thousands of Bahamians who provide a warm and authentic experience.

My colleague, John Pinder, MP for South & Central Abaco, as Parliamentary Secretary labors in the vineyard with me. He will tell his own story.

He is a good man. South & Central Abaco is blessed to have him, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to work with him in the Ministry of Tourism.

We are deeply invested in global promotion, and we are deeply invested in using technology to further expand our reach.

We have visited 10 cities in the USA and Canada on our global sales mission; with Atlanta and Nashville and Europe to go. We feature our creatives, Junkanoo, our art, food, drinks and culture.

We are deploying digital innovation, led by Senior Director Andre Miller, that allows us to spread new consistently captivating content throughout social media.

We have also made accommodations in this budget for the implementation of artificial intelligence in our marketing, promotion and data gathering efforts.

We will be exploring the integration of AI on www.bahamas.com for an enhanced user experience.

We will also be using artificial intelligence to identify tourists who are most likely to plan and afford a trip to The Bahamas.

It will be used in strategic media efforts to engage travelers in key regions with tailored messaging and diverse channels.

We believe this will improve our return on investment in advertising and give us meaningful and invaluable research on ideal markets.

It will also help us to determine the best market for Bahamasair direct non-stop flights.

We innovate with events like 'Our Oceans, Our Future', an immersive digital experience with Hidden Worlds in Miami earlier this year.

We plan on innovating to develop a Smart City downtown.

We're innovating by using technological solutions to speed up the processing of passengers at LPIA.

By the way, I have heard the complaints about the elimination of the "Nothing to Declare" line at LPIA.

It's wreaking havoc on returning residents unnecessarily and I have asked the appropriate officials to revisit this decision.

Work is currently being undertaken to enhance the visitor exit surveys via the development of a digital survey to streamline the data collection and analysis process.

And efforts are being made to digitize our existing paper-based immigration cards to make it easier to collect and analyze responses from visitors.

We have also developed a tech-tourism pitch to integrate even more technology in our overall offering. This will be a collaboration between the Tourism Development Corporation and Innovate242 that the Minister for Grand Bahama will speak to during this debate.

I am honored though, to be able to lead the phenomenal tourism rebound and I can talk about it for hours.

But let me sum it up this way.

All metrics are UP!

Average Daily Rates – UP!

Length of Stay – UP!

Spending – UP!

Tax Revenues – UP!

Airlift – UP!

Arrivals – UP!

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Madame Speaker, one of the bills we are debating as a compendium is the Tourism Development Corporation Bill.

We were set to debate and pass this bill a couple months ago, but debate was delayed due to a request for broader consultation.

We are a collaborative government, Madame Speaker, and we decided to allow stakeholders to give additional feedback even though public consultation was already part of the process, via the Tourist Related Entities Council.

In the spirit of bi-partisanship I shared the draft directly with the Leader of the Opposition at the beginning of April for feedback.

As this is a money bill, I'll explain in some detail. It is pivotal, revolutionary legislation, and it is past time that we pass it into law.

While establishing the Tourism Development Corporation, this bill also establishes the Tourism Development Fund and is a key piece of legislation that will encourage the resilient and sustainable development of the tourism industry.

Madame Speaker, in Our Blueprint for Change, we promised that we would launch an aggressive mission to empower Bahamians, and to create an environment where every Bahamian can thrive.

This bill helps us to do just that.

This is a vehicle to get comprehensive ownership in the economy for Bahamians, allowing the average Bahamian an avenue into the massive potential of the tourism industry.

We have been talking about linkages to tourism for decades, now we are doing something about it in a meaningful way.

We hear over and over, that Bahamians are locked out of the tourism industry; that the red carpet is laid out for foreign investors.

This bill encourages foreign investment with a view to their economic benefit to harness local entrepreneurship. As they say, a rising tide floats all boats.

The Tourism Development Corporation will lower the barriers to entry into the tourism industry for the average young man or young woman.

I have announced more than \$6 billion dollars in new FDI projects since coming to office.

We view the massive growth in FDI in the tourism space as not being for the sake of development itself or to simply enrich the developer, but to advance Bahamian ownership.

Tourism is booming and we intend to see Bahamians carve out more of a space in this lucrative market.

Before I went to Cabinet, I was what you would call a serial entrepreneur and I have had a fairly good eye for business.

Whilst I am not invested in tourism directly, this is where I would invest today given the massive growth and upside potential.

And I would do it right now.

We have the opportunity before us not to just have investors build developments, but to develop our people.

Legislation like this enables participation in our economy, beyond just jobs.

Now, let me say very clearly, there is nothing wrong with having a job.

We have helped create thousands of jobs so far.

And we are #JustGettingStarted.

Good, honest work is what we are trying to create with the Tourism Development Corporation.

Tourism is by far our biggest industry, and we must be the biggest owners of it.

And we need to be intentional and deliberate about this strategy.

Previously, the TDC operated as a department in the Ministry of Tourism.

When we came to office, we repurposed the TDC.

The TDC is now focused on providing sustained support to tourism entrepreneurs, strengthening their economic viability, improving the local product to enhance the visitor experience and ultimately growing the Bahamian economy.

The TDC will be a statutory body whose remit is to develop, enhance, expand, diversify, and revitalize tourism products and experiences whilst empowering Bahamians.

This bill will codify the Tourism Development Corporation to be the primary entity concerned with resilient and sustainable tourism development in The Bahamas.

It also establishes a Tourism Development Fund that would be controlled by the board of the corporation and that can be funded in numerous ways.

The relaunched TDC is also designed to support the ease of doing business in the tourism industry, to facilitate opportunities for tourism entrepreneurial growth, employment and income generation and to spread the benefits of tourism across the economy.

Through the TDC, we will promote domestic entrepreneurship, investment in tourism and facilitate tourism investment incentives, concessions and technical assistance for Bahamians.

In a nutshell, the TDC's purpose is to facilitate more and enhanced Bahamian-owned tourism offerings.

We often hear people say tourism concessions are only for the foreigner, but the truth is that the concession regime is actually more favorable to Bahamians. We will ensure that the system is designed for Bahamians to navigate it more easily.

This is for those who have an idea and aren't quite sure how to get it off the ground or for those who have a business but can't get it to take off.

Another key remit is the expansion of domestic investment in the vacation rental sector whether by AirBNB, VRBO, Booking.com or any of the digital platforms.

Yes, we want more. Our industry is booming, but we need more rooms. Whilst we build more hotels, this is the fastest way to expand capacity.

So, I call on Bahamians and residents to open your homes, help us to solve this incredible problem – whilst making money and creating wealth.

Hotels are consistently at capacity and this sector can serve as a vital supplement to accommodate guest stays.

The TDC will be structured so that new ideas and ventures will flourish.

TDC will also be scouting for the latest trends in tourism products and services, tech-tourism, in order for the government to be able to accommodate and foster growth.

The TDC will also have a major focus on the Family Islands to broaden participation in tourism.

What we have found, Madame Speaker, is that we have many, many tourism businesses and experiences in The Bahamas, yet far too few of them are in a centralized database that can be accessed by visitors and far too few of them have been vetted by tourism officials and given an official tourism endorsement and can feature on tdcBahamas.com with links to Bahamas.com.

We're looking at registering micro, small and medium-sized ventures.

A micro-sized venture would be one with one to four employees or one to six rooms in the establishment.

A small venture would have four-49 employees or 7-25 rooms.

And a medium-sized venture would have 50-249 employees and 26-75 rooms.

The TDC has the ambitious task of gathering data on these tourism products, endorsing them, supporting them and promoting them.

Beyond that, these enterprises can apply for a seal of approval from the corporation.

The seal would be granted in accordance with guidelines for standards and best practices with respect to tourism-related enterprises and products to protect the integrity of The Bahamas as a tourism destination.

We will support these businesses with Bahama Host and uniquely designed training opportunities.

The bill also encourages Corporate Social Responsibility.

We believe that foreign investors, while critical, should not just foster the development of their own products, but should contribute to the development of the tourism product and Bahamian enterprises as well.

The corporation will also provide special support to approved tourism-related entrepreneurs for growth, including for startups and early-stage tourism-related businesses in the form of physical space, coaching, and networking connections.

The TDC will collaborate, partner and liaise with any person, entity or group, public, private, non-government organization, community, Family Island or otherwise on matters that it deems will support private sector business development in tourism.

The corporation shall encourage networking among stakeholders and tourism supply chain entities to support linkages and advance tourism resilience, development and growth.

The Corporation will support and advise local tourism destination management and development advisory groups in the Family Islands to advance tourism destination products development, enhancement and preservation in our Family Islands.

Not only would the fund receive money from contributions from certain tourism-related enterprises, but it can also be funded through the budget, the Tourism Development Levy income from investments of the corporation and grants from multi-lateral agencies.

Madame Speaker, the bottom line is we've reformatted the TDC to create entrepreneurs and to grow entrepreneurs.

While we are still growing tourism, we have not been able to maximize visitor spend in the local economy and keep more of the spend at home.

Again, jobs are good to have.

But we also want to create ownership and wealth.

The TDC will be a place where entrepreneurs can register their businesses and activities so we can direct the traffic to them, from platforms like Bahamas.com.

And if you have an idea, but lack capital, the TDC will work with you on your business plan; it will provide some start up grants and work with entrepreneurs to bring their ideas to fruition.

Once the business is created, we will have a website and will encourage entrepreneurs to develop apps that tourists can access that will allow them to see the products and services offered and put them in touch with the businesses.

I want to emphasize that this bill does not compete with existing agencies.

Through working with the Small Business Development Center, the Bahamas Development Bank and the Bahamas Venture Capital Fund, the TDC will drive Bahamian ownership.

The TDC will provide technical support in touristic ventures, reducing the risk of financing and improving the chances of success.

The TDC will also create a registry for displaced Bahamian executives, with significant tourism experience. Given the massive growth we are seeing we need all hands on deck.

We need more a focused approach to empowering Bahamians to break the proverbial glass ceiling and manage resorts and this will be a go to source for hotels and new investors to seek the skilled professionals they need inside The Bahamas.

We are not doing a good enough job in advancing Bahamian professionals in tourism and the registry and collaboration with stakeholders will hopefully address this vexing issue.

In the work of the TDC, we are seeking support from the IDB and other multi-lateral agencies with some of it, and we have already received a commitment for support from the Saudi Fund for Development, which I will explain momentarily.

One of the major reasons we miss out on visitor spend, as I have repeatedly indicated, is a lack of things to do and not enough authentically Bahamian experiences.

We met with all cruise lines and hotel stakeholders to determine what tours they need, and we will continue this dialogue.

And one of the major impediments to tours and activities not being supported by the cruise lines is insurance.

What the TDC did was develop a blanket insurance program to ensure access by small operators who would not typically be able to afford \$1 - \$2 million of public liability insurance coverage.

The new structure and abilities of the Tourism Development Corporation puts us firmly on the right track to empower Bahamians and enhance our tourism product.

This is truly powerful and transformative legislation, and we are proud of it.

TDC/SAUDI PARTNERSHIP

Madame Speaker, I told you at the outset that I had little time during this presentation to entertain some of the more shortsighted and childish notions of the other side.

However, I must say that I find the member for Killarney, who is thankfully no longer prime minister, consistently focusing on the Prime Minister's travel to be rather absurd.

I know when the Prime Minister is gone because whenever I am here and the Prime Minister leaves the country, I act in his stead.

The member of Killarney might not know this since assuming the authoritarian post of the Competent Authority for so long, but the acting prime minister consistently briefs the Prime Minister on what is occurring, as do other members of Cabinet.

Does the member for Killarney and the opposition imagine the Prime Minister leaves and completely checks out from governance?

Does the member for Killarney and the opposition think the Prime Minister of The Bahamas stops being Prime Minister of The Bahamas because he has temporarily left The Bahamas?

It makes absolutely no sense, especially in the world of modern technology.

Further, this Prime Minister has had a far greater local impact than the former prime minister ever did.

There is nowhere in The Bahamas he has not been.

He spent the entire day with me in Forbes Hill to open the Cultural Village a few months ago. The first PM in history to spend quality time in this small community, demonstrating our commitment to the Family Islands.

He just headed a conference with the vice president of the United States as the chair of CARICOM, then went to Jamaica to chair a meeting there in that role about Haiti.

Then he flew in to check on Exuma when I was in California courting film industry investors, then went back to finish chair the meeting with CARICOM and Haitian leaders.

Then I saw him giving out medals to the young athletes at the national youth swim championships last weekend.

The member for Killarney only wishes he could have the impact our Prime Minister has at home and abroad.

He only wishes he had the type of energy that our Prime Minister has.

Further, The Bahamas is not the world.

This is important work!

Our Prime Minister has commanded global respect and carved out our place in the world as a serious player in the discussion on climate change and its impact on small island developing states.

So much so that we have had an official visit from US Vice President Kamala Harris, as the highest-ranking US official do so.

That's right, Prime Minister Davis sits at the table. He doesn't wait around sitting in the hallways like a schoolboy waiting to be called in by the principal.

If you want global attention – the good kind – you must go out into the world.

The money is out there, and we need it to come here, whether in Tourism, Investment, Trade or Green Climate Funds.

This is not at all difficult to understand.

Before I got into politics, I traveled the world at my own expense.

I was in business and needed to make global connections.

I had to go where they were to let them know that I was in business, and I wanted to do business with them.

And then they came here to explore those opportunities.

And you continue to build those relationships.

This was the cost of doing business – and it brought me incredible success.

And I hope you know, as Minister of Tourism, Investments and Aviation, I have been all over the world on behalf of The Bahamas.

If I had more time, I would have gone farther.

And I plan to keep going out.

And just like the Prime Minister can show the fruits of his travel, I can show the dividends that pay off when we go out to the world on behalf of the people of The Bahamas.

Madame Speaker, I am pleased to announce that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Government of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas have agreed a loan facility to fund the Tourism Development Corporation's Business Incubation Centers.

The \$10 million loan has been secured from The Saudi Fund for Development on extremely favorable terms including a five-year delay on principal repayments.

The money will be deposited into the Tourism Development Fund and will be used to develop incubation centers in Nassau, Grand Bahama and Exuma.

The Bahamas Incubation Center Project seeks to accelerate local economic development and increase entrepreneurial opportunities in the tourism sector by

providing young, fledgling businesses with the necessary support and resources to assist them in developing sustainable, profitable businesses.

Our research has shown that this initiative can have a vital impact on the economy by creating new entrepreneurs in our main industry.

Incubation centers also hope to capitalize on Entertainment and Cultural Tourism and will highlight Bahamian culture through visual arts, music and dance, theater, and Junkanoo – supporting the orange economy.

A portion of the loan will also be used to fund grants and small loans from the TDC to entrepreneurs on every island across The Bahamas, including Eleuthera, North Andros and The Berry Islands and Abaco too. We must encourage cottage industry and micro business. We must aspire for micro to become mid-sized and large businesses to become regional and international business. The TDC will do its part.

Madame Speaker, the Ministry of Tourism, Investments and Aviation entered into a memorandum of understanding with Saudi Arabia in December 2022 to create a unified strategy to share mutual tourism investment opportunities alongside day-to-day expertise in initiatives like sustainable tourism practices, management of tourism facilities and the sharing of insight, data and best practices.

This demonstrates the benefits of going out into the world.

We don't travel for fun, you see.

We travel to get things done.

QATAR

In the spirit on ongoing building of strategic relationships, I will travel to Qatar next week along with a small team to:

- Sign an MOU on Tourism.
- Sign an MOU on Aviation.
- Discuss cooperation and technical assistance with Qatar Airways as it relates to The Bahamas.
- Garner support for the Bahamas Aeronautical Academy.
- Garner support for building capacity for Air Space management.
- Garner further support for Nassau as a hub for non-stop flights from the Middle East for multi-destination Caribbean travel. And we are having a similar conversation with Emirates.
- We will get support for GBIA as a logistics hub for air cargo for the Caribbean and Latin America region.

- Get support for FDI investments in The Bahamas with a focus on Aviation and Renewable Energy.

BAHAMAS INVEST

Madame Speaker, consecutive administrations have talked a lot about Bahamas Invest – a proactive department of investments to promote, manage and attract FDI. The new construct will formalize a Promotions Unit, A compliance Unit, and a Facilitations Unit.

Further, as I indicated before, it is often said that domestic investors, although entitled to the same and more concessions, are not treated with the same level of seriousness as foreign investors.

As we committed in Our Blueprint for Change, we will refocus the Bahamas Investment Authority as a nimble promotional arm.

“Bahamas Invest” will focus on attracting investment and industry, across all sectors as we are committed to do in our Blueprint for Change.

We will enhance Bahamas Invest to fast-track and promote a new model of Foreign Direct and Domestic Investment. The Compliance Unit will ensure that

international investors comply with all of their obligations under statute and heads of agreement.

And we will expand the role of Bahamas Invest to include a Domestic Investment Board to support Bahamian businesses in participating more fully in the Tourism Value Chain.

The Director of Investments, Mrs. Phylcia Hanna, has already started work in regard to this transition, working along with McKinsey Consultants to deploy global best practices.

We intend to create the conditions necessary to achieve the equivalent of being ranked top 50 in the world in competitiveness.

The Ministry of Finance has pledged its support for the business plan for this initiative.

We have pledged this in at least the last three speeches from the throne.

And we intend to stand up Bahamas Invest during this fiscal year.

DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT

Madame Speaker, we now have a world-class, brand new cruise port at the Port of Nassau.

It is a stunning achievement that we are happy to have at our most popular entryway.

The NCP is owned 49% by Bahamian investors and another 2% by the YES Foundation for the benefit of the Bahamian people. It is the home to many new Bahamian entrepreneurs with authentically Bahamian products.

However, just outside the port is the disappointment that is Downtown Nassau.

We will, under no circumstances, allow Bay Street to remain in the state that it has languished in for decades.

The poor state of our capital's city center is even more glaring now that the port is there.

Senator the Hon. Randy Rolle has been assigned to work full time to monitor Downtown upgrades.

We are working with the Downtown Nassau Partnership to create and execute an overall plan for downtown, and we have already begun stakeholder engagement.

We have devised a plan with quick-wins, and wins with a short, medium and long-term horizon.

Right now, with the help of Commissioner Fernander, greater police presence will be visible and consistent.

We are working on a clean, safe environment Downtown.

And I want to be very clear about this: drug peddlers, hackers, hagglers, prostitutes, harassers, thieves and troublemakers are not welcome Downtown.

They are, in fact, not welcome anywhere, but there will certainly be zero tolerance Downtown and the mission of the police is to remove them.

Please understand that.

Do not seek to complain to me or anyone in this administration about it, you have been warned.

With 30,000 visitors per day there are enough ways to make an honest living in a manner that adds value, and we will support you in doing so.

We will also be working with the Ministry of Health, the police and the Department of Social Services to manage vagrancy.

We are sensitive to the plight of the mentally ill and those who suffer from addiction. With the passing of the Mental Health Act, we will manage this issue compassionately.

We will ensure that vagrants receive the care they need, and they will not receive that care wandering about and sleeping on the streets or in derelict buildings. We can do better to support our vulnerable and we will.

We are also working with the Department of Environmental Health Services to manage rodents. Those big pets we sometimes see running about are no longer welcome.

We have allocated \$1 million for downtown beautification in this budget. From this we expect tangible visible results – quickly.

The new Tourism Development levy will help tremendously. That \$2.00 the opposition is complaining about will go a long way.

They are chronic complainers and talkers you know. They complain about the state of downtown. They complain about the \$2.00. They were in government for 20 of the last 30 years and watched the decades-long decay of Bay Street and did very little about it.

We are committed to doing something about it.

Nine buildings have been identified for demolition downtown and notices have been given.

More demolition will begin in August this year.

We will triple the number of garbage cans downtown and have more timely power washing.

We will also revamp planters and benches and place new signage downtown.

We will be encouraging storefront competitions and native shows in Pompey Square and Rawson Square.

And Goombay Summer is coming back to Bay Street, this summer.

There will be more tourism ambassadors, providing information and support.

There will be more Bahamas Host training for police and vendors, and we will develop a system for short-term parking.

We will ultimately have better experiences and more instagrammable opportunities.

We plan to create a pedestrianized Market Street beside the Nassau Straw Market for more vendor spots.

And we plan to have more pedestrianized side streets downtown to showcase local music, arts, culture and vendors.

We intend to propose and consider closing Prince George Wharf to regular vehicular traffic during certain hours of the day, as a first step in fully pedestrianizing the wharf.

We plan to beautify the Churchill Building space, which will mean even more potential green space and potential vendor opportunities in the short term, until we establish a permanent plan for this historic site.

We will encourage investment in clubs, restaurants, entertainment and residences.

Everyone has complained about the state of downtown. Now it is time for everyone to do what they can to help.

Of course, Nassau Cruise Port is the catalyst that will keep this going.

Nassau Cruise Port has committed to providing \$8 million for the enhancement of downtown within 12 months after completion. Given the urgency of this need to improve, we hope to begin drawing this down hopefully sooner than that.

The more than 30,000 passengers a day coming into the port means there is enough for downtown, enough for RCI's beach club and for other areas east and west: enough for everyone.

For years, we have heard a great deal of discussions surrounding the regeneration and full revitalization of Bay Street.

This, of course, never materialized, resulting in the steady decline of business operations even before the unprecedented COVID-19 global pandemic.

This steady decline in business and closures coupled with a struggling tourism product has crippled commerce in the area, creating dead zones – notably in the eastern portion of Downtown.

It is important to note that we want and need this to be “our plan”. We will continue to engage with stakeholders. We will continue the incentives under the Downtown Revitalisation Act.

We want your feedback and best ideas, and we invite you to email them to downtown@bahamas.com.

INCUBATION CENTERS

In a very deliberate effort to fortify our position as the premier tourist destination within the Caribbean, the Tourism Development Corporation of The Bahamas will launch its Incubation Centers Downtown, converting what would be considered cost prohibitive spaces in the Downtown area into affordable shared spaces, while

providing a range of handholding technical support and resources to micro and small-sized enterprises.

The Bahamas Tourism Incubation Centers will be established and positioned East of East Street.

The main facility, which we have already secured, will be located on Bay Street, just east of the exit of the Nassau Cruise Port.

Smaller existing spaces have been identified for the project on both the northern and southern sides of Bay Street - beginning just east of Rawson square at Bay Street & East Street, and as far down as Christie Street. These smaller units will act as additional hubs for the Incubator Program with tour operators and authentically Bahamian products and will also feature Bahamian artists.

The Incubation Project was conceptualized with three main objectives in mind – to restore a rapidly declining commerce hub, facilitate economic growth, and enhance greenspace and the overall visitor experience.

It will serve as the instrument which underpins the long-awaited revitalization and rejuvenation of Downtown Nassau, with a keen focus on the eastern portion of the district.

Dilapidated and derelict buildings, if not demolished, will be transformed into attractive storefronts and entertainment centers, restoring the charm and beauty of Bay Street, but most importantly, its functionality as the commerce hub of the capital.

Closely tied to the Incubator initiative is the “Downtown Mural & Art Project” - an essential component that seeks to transform and beautify the area to create more aesthetically pleasing surroundings for our visitors and Bahamians.

The beautification of the eastern downtown area in particular is of critical importance to the incubator.

This Downtown mural project will be in collaboration with organizations such as UB, the National Art Gallery, His Excellency Jamal Rolle and the creative community to ensure at least one mile of murals is erected to show the history of the country, in a mini art district that will be a boost to the orange economy and harness the new look and feel of Downtown Nassau.

With the thousands of cruise passengers and stopovers traversing the area, the Incubator seeks to provide a reasonable solution to the frequented narrative – a lack of unique activities, experiences, products, and services being offered to our guests.

Thus, the Incubator is designed to bring together the best in local tours and excursions, unique and immersive experiences, as well as authentically Bahamian retail crafts and products – particularly those crafts and products in the cottage industries - together in innovative bustling spaces, in our effort to enhance the visitor experience.

The concept is for businesses to start in the main business/touristic centers, like Bay Street, rent-free for six months and then they grow and move out into their own store front.

We also have a plan for the western portion of downtown.

It is estimated that 8,000-10,000 people per day walk to Junkanoo Beach.

It is our intent to create an onshore beach experience for those people.

We have completed the survey of the area and it will be zoned into an orderly, well-designed cultural village.

We have new designs for the stalls, and we are looking at adding 12 new stalls.

Construction is expected to begin this summer, subject to the implementation of much-needed infrastructure by the Ministry of Works and Water and Sewerage.

BAHAMASAIR

A critical component of our airlift strategy in the ministry, Madame Speaker, is Bahamasair.

If you would note, we have modestly reduced the subvention for Bahamasair this year by several million.

We have placed a great deal of focus on new international routes: Tampa, Cincinnati, Cleveland and Nashville to Freeport and onward to Nassau.

We have also returned Bahamasair's seasonal flights between Freeport and Orlando and added a new route from Freeport to Raleigh Durham and hopefully another from Fort Lauderdale to George Town, Exuma.

These international flights bring tourists who spend more and maximize the economic benefit of our \$20 million-plus investment per year in our national flag carrier.

To accommodate this, Bahamasair has upgraded its fleet and continues to do so.

It purchased one additional B737-700 Next Generation aircraft at the end of May 2023, which is expected to be in service by this August.

This acquisition will allow for added routes and an additional 148 extra seats.

We expect Bahamasair's revenue to grow as a result over the next year by as much as \$8 million, making the case for reexamining the level of taxpayer support needed in the medium term.

When we came to office, the financial reporting of Bahamasair was unacceptably in arrears.

The airline has since successfully completed the 2020 financials and provided the 2021 and 2022 trial balances to external auditors.

Bahamasair expects to be fully up to date with its financial statements by December 2023.

This will allow for the refinancing of the airline's existing aircraft loan to reduce from the present 13 percent interest rate for what we are hoping will create millions in savings.

The pay-off and re-writing of loan commitments will also allow management to apply for more capital funding to assist in the acquisition of another aircraft in the upcoming fiscal year.

Meantime, management will continue to move the airline toward a cashless environment. Bahamasair is currently cashless in the US, Turks & Caicos and at LPIA.

In conjunction with Bank of Bahamas and other facilitators, Bahamasair expects to implement the use of the Central Bank sponsored Sand Dollar digital currency and wallet.

Bahamasair expects to add cargo services to Haiti and Cuba and other destinations during summer 2023, which will operate at night, when the equipment usually sits idle.

Management is placing a high priority in advancing interline and codeshare partnerships with industry airlines where we can operate as legs in a route or on behalf of another airline.

Bahamasair presently has several key airlines as interline partners including Delta, COPA, British Airways, United and others to be announced soon.

For the upcoming fiscal year, Bahamasair is targeting 10 additional airlines for codeshare/interline agreements to create seamless travel throughout the world.

Madame Speaker, on June 18th, Bahamasair celebrated 50 years of existence and service.

The airline started in 1973, under a PLP government I might add, after being combined from two carriers – Flamingo and Out Island Airways.

I congratulate Bahamasair on behalf of the government and the people of The Bahamas. Thanks to the board, management, staff and retirees for their dedication.

While the airline has had some financial turbulence, its record of safety and reliability is stellar, and it still stands today.

The pilots and the entire team are deserving of commendations.

I reiterate that we must not only assess the value of Bahamasair in terms of tax dollars invested, but we must also consider its overall benefit to the economy of the country in terms of the number of visitors it brings and how that spending impacts our GDP.

As I noted earlier, we are developing an important partnership with Qatar Airways, one of the most successful airlines in the world, on new routes, cargo, technical assistance and getting more value out of our national investment.

At Bahamasair we are #justGettingStarted.

BAHAMAS NATIONAL AVIATION STRATEGIC PLAN

The Bahamas this year developed the first ever Bahamas National Aviation Strategic Plan.

Thanks to Dr. Kenneth Romer, Director of Aviation, and the entire aviation sector for their major efforts.

Stakeholders will meet in Conclave on June 29, ahead of the National Launch.

The first ever Bahamas National Aviation Week will take place in October with local activities and will also include the Air Traffic Control International Conference.

The purpose of the Bahamas National Aviation Strategic Plan is to outline the direction that the aviation community will take over the next three years to seize opportunities and revolutionize the aviation industry to meet and exceed global standards.

This National Aviation Strategic Plan will focus on a systematic and pragmatic process of execution, with contributions from key stakeholders and entities.

REIMAGINING TOURISM

As our tourism product rebounds, we are looking at ways to reimagine our tourism industry.

We are looking at various avenues, such as partnering with the American TV and film industry.

We are putting ourselves in a position to bring major shows and networks to The Bahamas to produce. As a matter of fact, this coming January the Trumpet awards will take place in The Bahamas.

There is great interest in film, TV and movie production.

I recently had several productive discussions in California, and before this in Atlanta and Canada, which we will elaborate on in due course.

We will continue to nurture this interest.

Now, with direct non-stop flights from LA, we are opening a tourism office and a Bahamas Film Commission office in Los Angeles, California, this year.

We are also cultivating deeper investment in sustainable tourism, flat-fishing and Bahamian-owned resorts.

We are developing a new strategic plan, “Re-Imagining Tourism 2030”, that we will soon solicit feedback from our stakeholders on and ultimately share with the public.

GRAND BAHAMA

I just want to touch on Grand Bahama, in particular matters falling within my remit, but the minister will give an update during her presentation.

As the nation would have heard, we have signed a deal for the Grand Bahama International Airport that will see the attractiveness of the destination as an investment proposition grow dramatically.

We expect that the timelines for completion will be met, despite some extensive legal work being done. And I am pleased to say that the work is underway. Very soon this work will be visible with the beginning of the demolition of many of the eyesores.

There is continuing interest in the Grand Lucayan, but as I stated earlier this year, we will make an announcement when we have complete certainty, meaning the money for the purchase of the hotel is in escrow.

We are hopeful that will happen soon.

There are several issues with Grand Bahama, one of them being that there is not enough organic growth.

As we dramatically increase cruise visitors and airlift, we need an environment where there is economic growth generation to the point that opportunities for more businesses and employment are a natural offshoot.

The MOTIA and the TDC will do their part. But yes, we are hopeful for Grand Bahama.

Grand Bahama, we are working for you, and we are just getting started!

RAGGED ISLAND

To the people of Ragged Island, I want you to know that I will never forget you and I will never abandon you.

I remember the shoddy treatment you experienced pre and post Irma, and you have my word that this PLP government will never do you like that.

We have a new school being completed in time for the September school opening with the clinic shortly thereafter.

We are investing in eco-tourism, and we are looking at positioning the island as a commercial fishing hub. The TDC and the SBDC will be called upon to support these residents.

We will, as promised, be erecting a monument for those who died in the HMBS Flamingo tragedy and the survivors, including those who were terrorized on Ragged Island during that ordeal.

EXUMA

Madame Speaker, I would not be in this House today if it were not for my beloved Exuma. I am extremely grateful, and I promise to continue to serve you with diligence.

And Exuma, I want you to know that your MP is producing for you.

Aside from the overall picture of economic health in Exuma, which is fantastic, much has been done and there is still much to be done.

A few months ago, we launched the Forbes Hill Cultural Village to much success.

I want to let Exuma, and the people of Forbes Hill, know that Phase II is set to begin in the fourth quarter of this year.

Additionally, the Tourism Development Corporation is on track to begin the Incubation Center for small businesses by the fourth quarter of this year.

We are also going to start construction on our community center in George Town in early 2024.

The people of Exuma have also been quite patient while waiting for the continuation of construction of a new international airport.

Madame Speaker, the last PLP administration left in place plans for a new international airport, but then a new administration came along and decided to tinker with what did not need tinkering with.

They selected a contractor and then did not properly execute the funding, running up a \$10 million debt with the contractor.

I would need much more time during this debate just to explain how difficult it was to unravel that mess, but I can report that this PLP administration has secured funding and work on the landside of the new international airport in George Town is to begin this year.

Meantime, airside works on airport are underway. As Minister with responsibility for Aviation, I can also report that Bahamasair is working on creating an air hub on Exuma.

This will be a progressive plan to climax with the launch of the new terminal, hopefully in 2025.

However, I will have more to say on that at a later date.

Black Point, Staniel Cay and Farmers Cay, I can tell you that as a part of the Family Island Airport Renaissance Program you are getting your new airports.

You are getting your new clinics too.

Staniel Cay, your new schools should be open in September.

Black Point, we are in discussions with the Hon. Minister of Works about your new dock as well.

I want to let Exumians know that I have heard the complaint of unfair illegal competition from foreign charters operating locally.

And, in fact, that is addressed in the raft of legislation we are currently debating.

I have also heard complaints of foreign vacation rental owners competing with rental car companies on Exuma, and that is also being addressed.

As environmentally charming as Exuma is, we have to always maintain that which God has given us.

To that end, we will be relaunching Exuma Pride, our local beautification effort, to enhance Exuma and keep it clean.

I am also advancing requests to rename Elizabeth Harbour to Rolly Gray Harbour.

I will continue to push for that.

If we can get sailing made the national sport of The Bahamas, I am sure my colleagues can be convinced when they hear sound reasoning.

I am also continuing to push for more money for Local Government as has been the constant cry.

The new Family Island Development Fund is a good start, but we must continue to move in the direction of robustly funded development in the Family Islands.

We will shortly be launching Crime Stoppers on Exuma to make it even safer.

We are progressing nicely with the 45 miles of new smooth asphalt roads being built. We will ensure that many of the side roads including the Boulevard Road will be completed.

The water supply contract for Little Exuma has been signed and supplies are on the island.

We expect shovels in the ground on that soon.

The water contracts for Barraterre and George Town have been signed and works are being scheduled.

Madame Speaker, it pleases me to report that we have \$1.5 billion in new Foreign Direct Investment approved for Exuma since coming to office.

This, and the intense popularity of Exuma as a tourist destination means that we essentially have full employment on Exuma.

Our issue is filling jobs. So, if you are in Exuma and you are looking for work, or if you are from Exuma and you are looking for work on Exuma, please contact Team Cooper and register with our job bank.

We also have the Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute coming to Exuma soon, as well as our new primary school in George Town as announced by my colleague, the minister of education.

The skills honed by BTVI will be much needed in Exuma for the successful execution of the projects in the pipeline.

I urge Exumians to avail themselves of these opportunities.

There is, of course, no situation that is perfect.

And one of my biggest challenges, and admittedly my biggest disappointment on Exuma, is the mini hospital.

It is simply not where it needs to be and not useful enough to the people of Exuma or her guests.

I am in active dialogue with the minister of health to advance this, and I ask your forbearance as we work on improving the delivery of service of this healthcare facility.

Finally, I thank the team on the ground in Exuma who responded promptly to the recent flooding along with Prime Minister Davis and my Cabinet colleagues, the RBDF, the Ministry of works, local government and Island Administrator Rolle and

Anderson. We feel the pain of those residents impacted. We will continue the relief and mitigation until the job is done.

Let me end my remarks on Exuma on a good note.

I am delighted to announce that Fidelity Bank is coming to Exuma in the next few months.

This will be an innovative model of banking, working alongside existing money service providers.

As I promised in Long Island, they get a similar solution once this Exuma pilot is up and running. But you will be serviced in the interim from the Exuma Branch.

All of us who represent Family Islands understand the extreme challenges that have arisen as banks have continued to leave the Family Islands.

This continues to be a major concern for our administration.

We are endeavoring to work with financial service partners to ensure this vexing issue is resolved.

All Bahamians on all islands deserve access to banking, and it is not something we can simply let the market sort out. We must and will be deliberate and intentional on this issue.

Exuma and Ragged Island, I love you dearly and I am working for you daily and I want you to know **WE ARE JUST GETTING STARTED.**

With that, Madame Speaker, I rest.

This budget and the accompanying legislation have my full support.

I commend the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Economic Affairs, the Financial Secretary and their entire teams.

This will set us on a path of fiscal prudence and solidify our foundation for continued growth and development.

May God bless Exuma, the Exuma Cays and Ragged Island.

And may God bless the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.