



Nassau, Bahamas - The Honourable Dr. Michael R. Darville, Minister for Grand Bahama's Contribution to the 2015/2016 Fiscal Budget, delivered on June 8, 2015:

Mr. Speaker, while preparing for this debate, I distinctly recalled a conversation that I had with The Right Honourable Member for Centerville about six (6) years ago. During that time, the Honourable Member was the Leader of the Opposition, and was tasked with rebranding our political organization, rebuilding our political platform, selecting a cadre of candidates that would appeal to and connect with the electorate, travelling throughout the length and breadth of the country to share The Progressive Liberal Party's vision with the Bahamian people and asking both the young and the old for another chance to govern.

Mr. Speaker, after three (3) years of resounding our message of belief in Bahamians, in 2012, the people of this great country elected the Progressive Liberal Party at a margin of thirty (30) out of the thirty eight (38) seats in Parliament, and the great people of Pineridge gave me the opportunity to represent them in this Honourable place.

Mr. Speaker, Margaret Mead, American poet once admonished, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change our country and world." Mr. Speaker, as I listened to the Honourable Member for Centerville deliver the 2015-2016 budget communication, I got a deeper appreciation for who he truly is; as well as his love for and commitment to our country. For this reason, I am proud to carry the banner of the Progressive Liberal Party, to serve in this cabinet and to be a part of a generation of leaders who have determined to make the sometimes unpopular, but necessary policy decisions that will help to shape a stronger, safer, prosperous and modern Bahamas.

Mr. Speaker, since returning to office, this administration has encountered many unforeseen challenges, as we took steps to fulfil the mandates that were outlined in our Charter for Governance. As such, it would be disingenuous of me not to say that the last few years have been difficult for many of us, especially on the island of Grand Bahama. Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, this administration has determined that we cannot solve the country's problems by utilizing the same methods that created them; and as a result, we are moving forward and onward under the visionary leadership of the Right Honourable Member for Centerville, to facilitate the future security and prosperity of our country and people.

Mr. Speaker, Arnold Schwarzenegger once stated, "strength does not come from winning; but struggles develop strength. Going through hardships and deciding not to surrender is strength!" It is upon this strength, coupled with my sincere desire to build a better Bahamas for our children and grandchildren to grow up, work and live in, that I stand on behalf of the residents of Pineridge, to give my contribution to the 2014-2015 Budget communication.

Mr. Speaker, the year 2014 was difficult for all of us on Grand Bahama as both unemployment and the demand on social services increased. It was also wrought with tragedies including the sudden death of Dr. Myles Munroe, his wife, and leaders of the Bahamas Faith Ministries in New Providence and Grand Bahama, as well as Sir Jack Hayward, and many others, who have contributed significantly to the island of Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, despite all that we have experienced over the last fifteen (15) years, the people of Grand Bahama have demonstrated great resilience. We have weathered major hurricanes and survived the brunt of the global economic crisis that almost wiped out our local tourism industry; yet, we have not surrendered through hardships and as a result have developed immense strength.

Mr. Speaker, Ecclesiastes chapter 3, verses 1 and 4 reminds us that "to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." Although we are certainly not out of the woods as yet on Grand Bahama, we have seen a number of signs that point to the magic being returned to the magic city, which have convinced me that weeping time is over and a new season has begun.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to first of all speak to the launch of Bahamas Junkanoo Carnival on Grand Bahama Island, which took place at Taino Beach on April 17th & 18th, 2015. Mr. Speaker, this inaugural two (2) day event can be described as nothing less than phenomenal, as it successfully achieved the objectives of its organizers, which was to showcase Bahamian talent, culture and cuisine; and to stimulate the local economy of Grand Bahama.

It is my understanding, Mr. Speaker, that as a result of the collaborative efforts of the Ministry of Tourism and The Grand Bahama Junkanoo Carnival committee, which was superbly headed by Ms. Ginger Moxey, almost every hotel in Grand Bahama was booked, rental car companies were sold out, and every vendor on site made a significant profit.

Mr. Speaker, it was moving, as Minister for Grand Bahama, to see thousands of tourists and Bahamians alike gathered to celebrate our culture and to participate in this historic occasion, which is said to have been the largest crowd to ever have gathered at any one event on the island.

Mr Speaker, Grand Bahama has suffered much over the last few years. But despite it all, we are a proud people who are committed and determined to turn things around in our community for good. Many critics have said that this was only weekend of activities, and won't have any significant effects. However, I beg to differ as the feedback from international and domestic tourists has been excellent, and many have expressed a desire to return next year! It is my belief, Mr. Speaker, that this event has opened the door for many artisans, and will only get better. Added to the calendar of events for things to do on Grand Bahama, this event will attract more and more visitors in the years to come; and create a plethora of opportunities for Grand Bahamians.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, this administration continues to ensure that Grand Bahama is the venue of choice for international conferences and events. In just the first half of the year, three major conferences, including the Inter-American Development Bank Caribbean Governor's meeting and the World Customs Organization Conferences were both held at the Grand Lucayan Hotel in February and May, respectively, and the Global Environment Facilities Caribbean Constituency meeting was held at the Pelican Bay Hotel in May. It is my understanding that these conferences, combined, attracted approximately seven hundred fifty (750) delegates from various countries throughout the world, injected hundreds of thousands of dollars into our local economy, created numerous prospects for the international exposure of our state of the art harbour and infrastructure, and by extension, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for our residents.

Mr. Speaker, most noteworthy is the World Customs Organization (WCO) Conference and Exhibition, which for the first time was held in the Caribbean. This event attracted many local, regional and international stakeholders and created an avenue for relevant stakeholders to share knowledge and experiences; discuss the means to boost intra- and inter-regional trade, and the role that information technologies play in ensuring that this happens.

Mr. Speaker, the WCO Conference and Exhibition could not have happened at a more appropriate time, as the government of The Bahamas is now taking measures to improve and modernize the facilitation of trade, and strengthen the ability of The Bahamas Customs and Excise Department to collect revenue and protect our borders. Therefore, it was advantageous for officers of the Bahamas Customs and Excise Department to be given the opportunity to share ideas with and gain knowledge necessary for operating in a modernized Customs environment.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, I am particularly pleased that the conference fees were waived for representatives from local government and non-government organizations, customs brokerage houses, shipping and manufacturing companies, which allowed local entrepreneurs and employees to be exposed to this wealth of information.

Mr. Speaker, I am happy to report that Grand Bahama is certainly living up to its name as the fastest growing tourism destination in the country and possibly the region. On May 21, 2015, Grand Bahama received its first direct flight from Newark, followed by direct flights from Baltimore on May 22, 2015, and Cincinnati on May 23, 2015. Mr. Speaker, this is the second year for the Sunwing Vacation Express group's summer program, with the introduction of Houston as the newest city added to this program, which made its inaugural flight to Grand Bahama on Sunday, May 24, 2015, bringing one hundred and forty five (145) passengers to the island.

Mr. Speaker, The Ministry of Tourism's aggressive program to attract more airlift has paid off with Sunwing now providing over eight (8) weekly direct flights from major cities in the United States of America, which accounts for the high occupancy levels at Memories.

Mr. Speaker, Grand Bahamians are also making strides academically. I wish at this time and with your leave, Sir, to congratulate Samiaya Lundy, a sixth grade student of Sunland Baptist Academy, who beat out one hundred and twenty-one (121) nominees from both public and private schools around The Commonwealth of The Bahamas, to secure the title of 'National Primary School Student of the Year.'

Mr. Speaker, Samiaya's accomplishment is not one that has made her family proud, but in her words, is a good accomplishment for her school and for the island of Grand Bahama. Mr. Speaker, the nomination of Samiaya, as well as fourteen (14) other students from the island of Grand Bahama, demonstrate that despite our challenges, our island is indeed producing the best and brightest young people in The Bahamas.

Mr. Speaker, upon coming to office in 2012, this administration had the construction of the fire station for Grand Bahama as a priority, and as such we committed to doing so in our Charter for Governance. Nevertheless, there were technical challenges with the original plans, which had to be modified to ensure that all of the building codes and requirements were incorporated before construction could begin; thus causing unanticipated delays.

Mr. Speaker, I am elated therefore, that the contract was awarded to Patrick McDonald Construction Company, on Friday, May 29th, for the construction of a state of the art fire station. I am confident that the work will be completed on time and within budget, and that once this new facility has been constructed, the Fire Department will have the necessary equipment, supplies and infrastructure in place to allow firefighters to be able to perform their duties, both efficiently and effectively; Mr. Speaker, this is definitely great news for the people of Grand Bahama, and it demonstrates that this administration is fully committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of residents.

Mr. Speaker, now is the time to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our children; to promote the cause of peace and reclaim the Bahamian dream of a safer, prosperous and modern future. Mr. Speaker, this 2015-2016 budget brings new hope for Grand Bahama and lays the foundation for a stronger Grand Bahama; a Grand Bahama which will have a stronger economy, stronger infrastructure, a stronger health care system, stronger communities and a stronger workforce. For this reason, as the Minister for Grand Bahama, I am even more inspired, and recharged to fulfil my commitment to transform the economy of Grand Bahama and ensure that residents receive maximum benefits from all government initiatives.

Stronger Economy

Mr. Speaker, I have said it over and repeatedly and I will say it again, that the success of The Bahamas is predicated upon the success of Grand Bahama. To that end, in order to build a Stronger Bahamas, we must build a Stronger Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, upon coming to office in 2012, Grand Bahama had the highest levels of unemployment and economic hardships in the country. Nevertheless Mr. Speaker, this administration, with the assistance of our private partners, has facilitated various projects designed to spur economic growth, create jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, our detractors will argue that the unemployment rate is at an unacceptable level on the island of Grand Bahama and attribute this to the government's inability to attract foreign direct investments. While I do agree that unemployment is still high on Grand Bahama, it is definitely not a reflection of this administration's inability or unwillingness to attract foreign direct investments or create employment opportunities, and our record clearly speaks for itself. Rather, it is a consequence of an expanded workforce, which increases every year, as hundreds of students graduate.

Mr. Speaker, if this administration has not attracted any foreign direct investments since coming to office three years ago, then what do you call the newly opened three hundred and fifty (350) room Hilton hotel in Bimini, Memories Beach Resort in Grand Bahama and the recently signed agreement for an upscale resort, the Four Seasons at Cotton Bay, in South Eleuthera?

Mr. Speaker, in addition to these new investments, many existing businesses throughout the length and breadth of our archipelago, and particularly on Grand Bahama, have committed to expand their existing operations, which signals an increase in investor confidence in both the global and local economies, and are a direct result of this administration's strategic and targeted efforts, as well as our investor friendly policies.

Mr. Speaker, while the aforementioned projects are tangible examples of development, which in addition to our fiscal reforms, promise to spur economic growth throughout the country, I wish to speak specifically about the number of new and expanding developments, both in the ground and in the pipeline, which I am certain will diversify and deliver the additional revenue to create a stronger economy for Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, our private sector partners on Grand Bahama continue to assist the government with fulfilling our mandate to create entrepreneurial and employment opportunities, train Bahamians with the necessary skills required to obtain permanent, sustainable jobs.

Mr. Speaker, according to the Grand Bahama Port Authority statistics, over the past year, a total of one hundred and eighty (180) new businesses opened in the city of Freeport. Most notable is the opening of:

- Harmony Poultry, which has injected over one million dollars (\$1,000,000.00) in the economy and employed seventy (70) persons;
- Five Palms Service Station Limited, which has made a capital injection in excess of nine hundred and ninety two thousand dollars (\$992,000.00) and will employ eight (8) persons;
- Bahamas Tobacco International Limited, which made a capital injection of approximately six hundred and fifty thousand dollars (\$650,000.00) and employed thirty (30) employees;
- Senor Frogs Grand Bahama Limited, which opened a second restaurant at the Freeport Harbour trading as Fat Tuesday Grand Bahama, injected approximately five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000.00) in the local economy and employed thirty-one (31) employees;
- Caribbean Silver International, which opened two (2) boutique souvenir stores in Port Lucaya, injected approximately two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000.00) in the local economy; and employed ten (10) persons;
- Open MRI of The Bahamas Incorporated Limited, which opened in the Medical Pavillion Building with a capital injection of approximately one hundred and eighty thousand dollars (\$180,000.00), and employed three (3) persons;
- The Copier Limited, which opened in the Seahorse Plaza with a capital injection of approximately fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000.00) and employed five (5) persons;
- Emporium Distributors (Bahamas) Limited with a capital injection of approximately forty thousand dollars (\$40,000.00) and employed one person.

Mr. Speaker, these investments alone, collectively injected \$3.6 million dollars into the local economy, and employed a total of one hundred and fifty-six (156) persons.

Mr. Speaker, the Grand Bahama Port Authority statistics further confirm that out of the one hundred and eighty (180) new businesses opened in Freeport over the past year, which in total have injected seventy four million, one hundred fifteen thousand, three hundred dollars (\$74,115,000.00) into the local economy; one hundred and sixty nine (169) of those are owned by Bahamians. Mr. Speaker, these figures... these cold hard facts, prove the naysayers, whose opinion is that this administration is not encouraging domestic investment and promotion of local entrepreneurs, wrong AGAIN.

In addition Mr. Speaker, a number of businesses have expanded, are in the process of expansion or have committed to expanding within the upcoming months. These include:

- Statoil, which recently broke ground on a six million dollar (\$6,000,000.00) administrative complex;
- BORCO and Statoil, which combined have embarked on tank refurbishment projects in the amount of ten million

(\$10,000,000.00) dollars;

- Hutchinson Whampoa which has announced the renovation and refurbishment of their Lighthouse Pointe Hotel in the amount five million dollars (\$5,000,000.00);
- Freeport Container Port which is expanding its container terminal in the amount of two hundred and fifty million dollars (\$250,000,000.00);
- The Freeport Harbour Company which is repairing the berths at the harbour in the amount of seventeen million dollars(\$17,000,000.00), as well as continuing its dredging project, in order to accommodate the larger super post panamax vessels.

Mr. Speaker, this spur of economic activity is not just limited to the Freeport area. In fact, Mr. Speaker, the people of East/West Grand Bahama and the surrounding settlements are happy that finally, after all these years, the Government has levelled the playing field for them to receive similar benefits as Licensees of the Grand Bahama Port Authority, by way of the amendment of Chapter 98.56 of the Tariff Act in July, 2014. Now, potential local business persons who wish to invest in the outlying areas of Grand Bahama, have access to duty free concessions on building materials and capital goods, for the start-up and expansion of their businesses.

Mr. Speaker, given the present state of the economy in Grand Bahama, I am more than pleased to report that the duty free concession unit within my Ministry has received dozens of applications for duty-free concessions to date, of which twenty-three (23) have been approved and licensed, with others at various stages of the approval process.

Mr. Speaker, I listened to the Member of Parliament for East Grand Bahama on a radio show, as he questioned the viability of this initiative and noted that he will await to see how many persons will benefit.

Mr. Speaker, for the record of this house, and for the exhortation of the Member for East Grand Bahama, I wish to highlight those that have:

East Grand Bahama

- Water Cay Bonefish Lodge, located in Water Cay;
- 20/20 Bonefishing Company Limited, located in Macleans Town;
- East End Properties Limited, located in Macleans Town;
- Ramses Energy Partner Limited, located in Macleans Town;
- Smith's Construction Company Limited, located in Bevans Town

West Grand Bahama

- GB Car Rental Company, located in Bootle Bay;
- Boardwalk Seafood Distributors, located in West End;
- Destiny Mainetenace, located in Pinder's Point;
- Cool Breeze Restaurant & Bar, located in Hunter's;
- Superior Water Depot, located in Bartlett Hill;
- Bread of Life Bakery, located in Pinder's Point;
- Brown Law Chambers, located in West End;
- D'Avion's Laundromat, located in Hunter's;
- Destani Liquor Store, located in Hunter's;
- Shop Rite Convenience Store, located in Pinedale;
- West Grand Bahama Raspberry Bakery, located in Martin Town;
- Neighbour's Food Service, located in Eight Mile Rock;
- Grant's Laundromat, located in Hanna Hill;
- Celebrity Eco-Adventures Limited, located in Deadman's Reef;
- Russell & Pinder's Funeral Home, located in Martin Town;
- Northern Bahamas Utilities Holdings Company Limited, located in Holmes Rock;
- L & L Properties LLC, located in Bootle Bay

Mr. Speaker, I wish at this time to share the story of Big G's Seafood Restaurant & Bar, which was able to take advantage of the duty free exemptions provided by this administration, in the estimated amount of forty thousand dollars (\$40,000.00).

Mr. Speaker, in 2004, this staple in the Pinder's Point community shut its doors as a result of the hurricanes, and the fall in business. Nevertheless, after receiving concessions for restaurant equipment, air condition units and television sets, Big G's reopened its doors and is now fully functional. Mr. Speaker, just last Monday, I along with staff of my ministry and the administrator or chief councillor for West Grand Bahama, toured this facility and I am happy that Mr. Moore has been able to bring this business back to life!

Mr. Speaker, I also wish to share the story of Boardwalk Seafood Distributors, an existing business which was able, as a result of exemptions, of approximately seventy-three thousand dollars (\$73,000.00) to acquire building materials, office equipment, a delivery van and stone crab traps to expand its operations.

Mr. Speaker, I also visited this establishment which is located in West End during the earlier part of this year. I was elated to witness first-hand its restoration, as well as to learn that its proprietor was able to hire young Grand Bahamians to complete its renovation and employ twelve (12) staff members.

Mr. Speaker, the Father of our Nation, Sir Lynden Pindling articulated in his speech entitled "The PLP Way," that as leaders of this country it is incumbent upon us to create policies that will include the underprivileged and "protect the least able to protect themselves. That is our hope. That is the PLP way. That is the only way that will allow rich and poor, black and white, employer and employee, private entrepreneur and civil servant to live in peace in our Bahamas. That is the way to bring hope to a suffering people." Mr. Speaker, I am elated that through this government initiative, this administration was able to do just that!

Mr. Speaker, our Charter for Governance unequivocally indicated this administration's commitment to the establishment of duty concessions for East and West Grand Bahama, and we have delivered on this promise.

Mr. Speaker, the opening of these new businesses, not only represent the creation of new employment opportunities, but speaks to the rebirth of the entrepreneurial spirit, which was developed in the womb of persons who now have optimism and confidence that our local economy has turned the corner and will only grow stronger in the years to come.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, in an attempt to further diversify the touristic economy of Grand Bahama, this administration through its Antiquities and Monuments department, and with the assistance of its private sector partners, are in the planning stages of establishing two museums, one of which is earmarked for West End, our capitol, at the site of the old Commissioner's residence, and the other, at the former Shannon Golf & Country Club, in Lucaya.

Mr. Speaker, these museums promise to assist with the rebuilding and rebranding of our tourism industry by offering additional attractions to visitors. These museums will be beneficial to visitors and residents alike, especially to our young people who will have the opportunity to learn the history of the island.

Mr. Speaker, the Freeport Museum and Art Gallery will also provide a platform for budding Bahamian artisans to display their work and potentially gain international exposure. Both museums will create new revenue streams, entrepreneurial and employment opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, as you are aware the Real Property Tax and Business License Tax provisions of the Hawksbill Creek Agreement will expire in August this year.

Over eight weeks ago, The Prime Minister has appointed a committee of six distinguished Bahamians, with a Terms of Reference to review the Hawksbill Creek Agreement and the economy of Grand Bahama Island and, to compile a report to the Government, with recommendations and solutions to revive and expand the economy of Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, of the six Committee members, four are well known and respected Grand Bahamians. I am confident that the Committee will make recommendations that will be to the benefit of all stakeholders as it seeks to fulfill its mandate to diversify and strengthen the economy of Grand Bahama Island.

Mr. Speaker, the economy of Grand Bahama is indeed stronger than we met it in 2012; and through the progressive policies instituted by this administration, it will continue to grow and diversify in the months ahead.

Stronger Infrastructure

Mr. Speaker, investment in first class infrastructure is at the heart of our vision for a Modern Bahamas, and is essential to securing stronger and more sustainable economic growth in Grand Bahama, and by extension The Bahamas.

Mr. Speaker, most of the infrastructural projects that were allocated in the previous year's fiscal budget, were delayed as a direct result of the government's decision to aggressively pursue its medium term fiscal consolidation plan to stimulate economic growth; restrain public expenditure; enhance revenue administration and secure new sources of revenue. Nonetheless, all of the necessary planning and preparation to bring these projects to the contractual stage has been completed.

Mr. Speaker, as the Member for Centreville mentioned in his budget communication, the country is now on course, having achieved a dramatic turnaround in the state of our public finances; and resultantly, we can now move forward in this fiscal budget to actualize the capital works projects allocated for Grand Bahama Island.

Mr. Speaker, as mentioned earlier in my communication, the contract for the new state of the art fire station, which was allocated in the previous year's budget under Head 33, has already been awarded and Grand Bahamians can expect construction to commence in the ensuing months.

Water Cay Upgrades

Mr. Speaker, in our Charter for Governance, this administration promised to implement measures to greatly improve the social and economic conditions, as well as infrastructure in the Family Islands. In my 2014-2015 midterm budget, I reported on the major infrastructural developments that have occurred on beautiful Water Cay, just north of Grand Bahama, which included the excavation and renovation of the government docking facility at BTC's landing site, at the cost of sixty seven thousand, one hundred dollars (\$67,100).

Mr. Speaker, I further mentioned that there will be additional upgrades in the form of the installation of an one thousand one hundred (1,100) gallon water tank and the refurbishment of the teacher's residence, which will be used as a hurricane shelter. I am happy to report that we have delivered on this promise and these upgrades, to the tune of twenty one thousand, five hundred dollars (\$21,500.00) are complete!

Mr. Speaker, once again the residents of East Grand Bahama have something to smile about!!

Elevated Fishing Hole Road Causeway

Mr. Speaker, over the last two and a half (2 1/2) years, there have been significant advances made that will propel us to the ground breaking of the newly proposed Elevated Fishing Hole Road Causeway.

Mr. Speaker, we have had many challenges over the last fifteen (15) years, and the most recent costal engineering geotechnical reports at the proposed site proved to be in favour of a causeway.

Mr. Speaker, we have now ascertained the engineering reports, which support the design-build concept. This was one of several options that were considered, but was found to be the one that will lead to a more expedient start.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to report that my ministry and The Ministry of Works are working closely to finalize all the engineering requirements, prior to the tender process which will begin on Monday, June 8, 2015.

Mr. Speaker, I am proud to unveil to this Honourable house and to the residents of Grand Bahama who may be watching, the conceptual drawings for the proposed Fishing Hole Causeway. (SHOW PICTURES & SPEAK BRIEFLY

ON THEM).

Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank our private sector partners, including the Grand Bahama Harbour Company, the Grand Bahama Power Company, Bahama Rock and The Freeport Container Port for their support thus far, and look forward to working closely with each of them once the contract is awarded.

Smith's Point Seawall

Mr. Speaker, the residents of Smith's Point continue to experience concern of severe challenges caused by coastal erosion. Mr. Speaker, I wish to assure the residents of Smith's Point that we remain committed to this project. Yes, there were some setbacks with the preliminary engineering work done years ago, but I am pleased to report that Carver Grant and Associate's Engineering, a local company, was mobilized to complete the geotechnical survey, to determine the topography of the land and the most appropriate means to proceed.

Mr. Speaker, as it has been decided that a design-build concept will be utilized, the information elucidated from the geotechnical study, are being used to decide the design of the sea wall and the material to be used to build it. After which, this information will be passed on to the Ministry of Works, whose engineers will complete the final drawings before the contract goes to tender.

Upgrade to government buildings

Mr. Speaker, on coming to office, I was instructed by The Minister of Works to assess government buildings on Grand Bahama to determine specific needs. After initial assessments of The Harold DeGregory Building, where my ministry is housed; The Farmer's Market, and the Garnet Levarity Justice Center, it was determined that all needed major infrastructural and aesthetic upgrades.

Mr. Speaker, as I communicated in the midterm budget, in keeping with this administration's commitment in The Charter for Governance to better use and maintain government buildings, the Harold DeGregory Government Complex has undergone major cosmetic renovations, the first and second floor of the complex have been transformed to accommodate two (2) additional government departments; and at present, the fifth floor is being renovated to accommodate others.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to report that the tendering process for the Farmer's Market is now complete and the contract for the renovation and modernization of this site, which is frequented by tourists, and Bahamians alike, has been awarded to SRA Construction. As mentioned in the midterm budget, the scope of work for this project will include the improvement of pedestrian and vehicular circulation, as well as the physical structure of the stalls, enhancement of the aesthetic environment and landscaping, refurbishment and updating of the bathroom facilities, making them handicap accessible, the construction of two (2) new stalls for eateries, a beverage depot, along with a covered annex for entertainment and dining.

Mr. Speaker, the vendors in this market have long petitioned the government for assistance with making their environment more modern and appealing, and we are happy that within the upcoming months, we will deliver!

Mr. Speaker, the Garnet Levarity Justice Center was in desperate need of renovations, as it has had no major repair work done to it since 2006, which of course, was under the former PLP administration. Subsequently, I am pleased to report that the tendering process is complete, and the contract has been awarded to All State Construction Company, for the overhaul of the exterior and interior of all deteriorated areas of both the court house and the police station, which include painting of buildings, repairing of columns and ceilings.

Mr. Speaker, this work has already begun, and will be completed in six (6) weeks.

Mr. Speaker, the post office, which is located on Explorer's Way, Downtown, Freeport has also deteriorated over the years and is in immediate need of repair. Mr. Speaker, in Head 33 of the 2014-2015 budget, four hundred thousand

dollars (\$400,000.00) was allocated for the renovations of the Freeport Post Office, which did not materialize. Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, this four hundred dollars has now been allotted in the Ministry for Grand Bahama's budget under Head 74 for the repair of the Freeport Post Office and other satellite post offices on Grand Bahama Island.

Mr. Speaker, due to overcrowding at Eight Mile Rock High and the failing infrastructure, it was recommended that a new high school be built in the Holmes Rock settlement to replace the sixty (60) year old Eight Mile Rock high school. I am pleased therefore, that the Honourable Member for Centreville articulated this administration's intent to construct a new, state of the art school which will provide an economic and educational boost for this community.

Mr. Speaker, permit me to report also, that The Grand Bahama Port Authority Group of Companies are nearing completion of the construction of the bridge at Grand Bahama Highway, which is the only highway in the city of Freeport that is owned by the Government of the Bahamas. Completion of this bridge will allow students and faculty at the College of the Bahamas, access to that facility within twelve (12) minutes from the town center of Freeport. And just as important, it will significantly reduce the travel time for residents of East Grand Bahama, something which my ministry has been advocating for the last 2 ½ years.

Additionally Mr. Speaker, last month the Grand Bahama Port Authority engaged the services of a well-known local artist, Mr. Sheldon Saint to lead a team who have been charged with the task of beautifying six dilapidated buildings throughout the city of Freeport, as part of the Grand Bahama Port Authority's derelict building enhancement project. Mr. Speaker, work is expected to begin immediately on the County Squire building, which is located on Queens Highway, followed by the Coral Plaza building on Sunrise Highway and Coral Road. It is my understanding that each building is expected to take two (2) months to be completed.

Mr. Speaker, in order for businesses to invest and grow they need confidence that they will have access to the best infrastructure to support that growth. Strong infrastructure form the backbone of a modern economy and calculated investments in such projects is central to this administration's long term economic plan to achieve a prosperous Bahamas. I am happy that our private sector partners are doing their part to assist us in achieving our objectives.

Stronger Healthcare

Mr. Speaker, this administration is making great strides toward realizing our strategic goal, which is to enhance public health services for all Bahamians.

Mr. Speaker, in excess of one million dollars (\$1,000,000.00) has been spent to renovate and upgrade medical clinics in all outlying areas of Grand Bahama in order to ensure that all residents of Grand Bahama have access to the same quality of healthcare.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, we have hired some twenty eight (28) new physicians and additional support staff to address the manpower challenges that existed in the public healthcare system on Grand Bahama; updated the fleet of vehicles for doctors and nurses who provide Home Care and Domiciliary Care services, as well as those who are involved with Infection Control and Surveillance, and, School and Community Health; renovated, upgraded and retrofitted all of the community clinics and extended the hours at these facilities, as well as added a new family practice clinic at the Rand Memorial Hospital, in order to shift the burden from the Accident and Emergency Department of the hospital, so that patients with more serious illnesses can get the critical care services they need without long waits, and our specialists can focus on critical cases.

Mr. Speaker, as a result of these initiatives, the efficiency of the emergency room at the Rand Memorial Hospital has improved and overall, the residents from East to West Grand Bahama are receiving the improved quality of healthcare services that they truly deserve.

Mr. Speaker, this administration has also facilitated major renovations to the Rand Memorial Hospital, and has engaged the services of Lawrence Chisholm & Associates to design the blue print that will be used to further improve the current and infrastructure at our present tertiary health care facility. Some of these upgrades include the

refurbishing of the former Accident & Emergency department, which is located on Atlantic Drive, to accommodate an eight (8) bed private unit; and the transformation of the former physiotherapy department to a new infectious disease department that will be fully equipped to accommodate all categories of infectious diseases, including Ebola.

Mr. Speaker, while this administration seeks to improve our present healthcare facilities on Grand Bahama Island, we remain committed to the construction of a new state of the art hospital for Grand Bahama, by way of a public private partnership.

Mr. Speaker, the update to the 2006 Dorsett Report, which substantiated the health care needs of Grand Bahama, and will provide the basis for the business case, will be completed within fifteen (15) weeks. Once this important update is completed, our advisors will finalize the business case and the RFP documents.

Mr. Speaker, as I have said many times before, the health and wellness of all residents in Grand Bahama is of paramount concern to this administration. We will continue to demonstrate this commitment to the provision of quality health care in Grand Bahama in the months and years ahead, as we rapidly move to the proposed January, 2016, implementation of National Health Insurance, which I wish to reiterate to the people of Grand Bahama; in its initial phases, will be of no cost to the people of The Bahamas.

Stronger Communities

Mr. Speaker, in order for The Bahamas to be stronger, we must provide our citizens with essential building blocks of wellness and growth: health, education, employment and equality for all.

Mr. Speaker, over the past few weeks, there has been much talk about the safety of residents, and the need to put proper legislation and regulations in place to protect Bahamians, who live in communities in close proximity to industrial zones.

Mr. Speaker, for decades the residents of Pinder's Point and Lewis Yard and the surrounding areas, which border the industrial park on Grand Bahama, have bemoaned and petitioned successive Governments and local authorities to address their complaints about the perceived negative effects that continuous exposure to noxious odours, noise, chemicals and the nuisances emanating from the neighbouring industrial park, has had or is still having on their health and well-being; and their environment.

Mr. Speaker, it is an indisputable fact that two major high schools were relocated from the Hawksbill community over twenty years ago because of ongoing illnesses of teachers, staff and the student population of those institutions; which medical authorities at that time attributed to the unrelenting noxious odours from the industrial plants in close proximity to the schools. Most recently, this administration was also forced to relocate the Lewis Yard Primary School for similar reasons; and The Grand Bahama Port Authority, BORCO and other industrial partners in close proximity to that school assisted with this venture.

Mr. Speaker, although there is very little documented medical evidence to support the majority of the claims, residents in these areas are convinced that the high rate of cancer and birth deformities in their communities are directly related to the operation of industrial and chemical plants that are in close proximity to their residences. In fact, Mr. Speaker, according to the long-time residents, prior to the presence of these plants, such abnormalities, cancers and environmental issues did not exist.

As a result, Mr. Speaker, after decades of this ball being kicked down the road by successive governments, this administration in our Charter for Governance, outlined its commitment to the proposed relocation of the residents, in these communities. If indeed it is found that they are at risk, The Ministry for Grand Bahama, in conjunction with The Ministry of Environment and Housing will address this problem head on.

Mr. Speaker, the government has contracted PAHO/WHO, both reputable organizations, to complete an independent Environmental and Health Risk Assessment in the Pinder's Point, Lewis Yard and surrounding areas to determine, if any, the negative health effects on residents and to the environment.

Mr. Speaker, on April 13th, officers from PAHO/WHO, the Department of Environmental Health and my ministry had a successful town meeting with residents and landowners in Pinder's Point, Lewis Yard and the surrounding areas to apprise them of the steps going forward. Spearheaded by Dr. Jerry Eijkemans, PWR for PAHO/WHO's offices in The Bahamas and The Turks and Caicos; and Dr. John Rainford, internationally renowned risk management specialist, this meeting provided the opportunity for residents to share their experiences; as well as voice their concerns; and allowed for the project management team to outline the progress of the project and solicit the cooperation and support of the residents as we move forward to Phase Two of the project, which will require sampling and data collection exercises in the communities.

Mr. Speaker, as of Monday, June 1, 2015 representatives from PAHO/WHO's collaborating centres in The Netherlands arrived on Grand Bahama to begin air and ground sampling exercises in the suspected contaminated areas. Two consultants, namely Dr. Michiel Jonker and Dr. Stephan A. van der Hiejen are presently in these communities to complete this important phase of the study.

Mr. Speaker, in the weeks and months ahead we will continue to update the community; and the results of the environmental sampling will be compiled in a final report that is scheduled to be completed in the last quarter of this year, and will guide the government on the necessary steps post study.

Mr. Speaker, Urban Renewal continues to play an intricate role in Grand Bahama and the Northern Bahamas. Our Urban Renewal Department works daily to ensure that those who may have fallen short or are in need, gain access to various educational and social programs. Mr. Speaker, small home repairs are ongoing and many lives have been meaningfully impacted by this project.

Mr. Speaker, my ministry has administrative oversight over twelve (12) centres on Grand Bahama, Abaco, Bimini and Cat Island, and I am pleased to say that the staff of Urban Renewal is moving through the communities, and fulfilling the mandate to bring relief to the most disadvantaged through the provision of opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, during our assessment of East and West Grand Bahama, it was determined that there was a great need for residents in these communities, whose homes were either damaged as a result of the hurricanes or have generally deteriorated throughout the years, to have access to building materials for their reconstruction and repair. Mr. Speaker, although Urban Renewal has a small home repair program, I have found that it is simply not enough to meet the demands of all those persons who need to upgrade their facilities and homes in the outlying settlements of Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased therefore that an amendment to the Family Island Development Act now allows residents in East & West Grand Bahama to purchase building materials duty free for this purpose, for the period of one year. Mr. Speaker, I am certain that these exemptions will provide construction jobs for residents as well as improve the living conditions and aesthetics in our outlying communities.

Mr. Speaker, building a Stronger Bahamas begins with building stronger individuals, families, communities and islands, and through our innovative initiatives, this administration is doing just that!
Stronger Workforce

Mr. Speaker, I firmly believe that we can strengthen the economy of Grand Bahama and its ability to grow and attract high-wage employers by investing in education and training, thereby increasing the number of well-educated persons in our local workforce. In this regard Mr. Speaker, I believe that this administration is on the right track, as we are providing our young persons with numerous training opportunities, in conjunction with our private sector partners.

Mr. Speaker, in an effort to introduce students to and spark their interest in the lucrative careers available in technical and vocational industries, the annual Grand Bahama High School Industrial and Technical career fair was organized by my ministry, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and our private sector partners.

Mr. Speaker, we have held two successful career fairs thus far, and in October of this year, high school students from

across the length and breadth of Grand Bahama will be given the opportunity once again, to be exposed to the major employers in Grand Bahama and the careers available at each.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, the revamped Fresh Start program, a fifteen (15) week employment skills programme is providing young people between the ages sixteen (16) to twenty five (25), who for a number of reasons are in need of assistance, with the skills and experiences that are necessary to successfully find and retain a sustainable job.

Mr. Speaker, this program, comprises courses such as Computer & Business Administration, Accounts & Quickbooks, Welding, Acrylic Nails and General Maintenance; with instruction provided by The Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute and The Bahamas Institute of Business Technology.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to report that all sixty (60) young people who entered the program in January of this year, will graduate on June 12th. Mr. Speaker, I must say that over the past three years, this program has grown significantly and has been extremely successful at producing trained, skilled youth that are ready for the job market. In fact, a number of the former participants are gainfully employed, and I understand that a number of this year's graduates have already received job prospects.

Mr. Speaker, the government's National Apprenticeship program, mentioned in the Rt. Honourable Member for Centreville's budget contribution, will serve to further augment the efforts of both the government and our private sector partners, which include: BORCO, Grand Bahamas Shipyard, Bahamas Technical Education Center and Memories Grand Bahama, who presently have active training programs that assist with the training of young Grand Bahamians.

Mr. Speaker, Franklin D. Roosevelt, former President of The United States once said, "we cannot always build a future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future. Through the aforementioned programs, this administration is doing just that!

Overview of the Budget

Mr. Speaker, I now turn my attention to the actual budget, which I would like to speak about briefly, but more specifically, to the increase of 2.4 million dollars in my Ministry's budget, which can be found under Head 74.

Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned earlier, the Maintenance of Freeport Post Office, was added to Block 80 of my ministry's budget, which counts for an in in the amount of four hundred thousand dollars (\$400,000.00). As a result Mr. Speaker, residents of Grand Bahama can rest assured that in the upcoming months, they can look forward to more slightly and modernized post office facilities.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, in my 2014-2015 budget communication, I pointed out that the government expanded my ministry's administrative responsibilities by streamlining the payment of utilities for ALL government departments on the island, through the allocation of four million, seven hundred and sixty thousand (\$4,760,000.00), for electricity, and one million, six hundred and ninety thousand, four hundred (\$1,690,400.00) for water in the line items under block 30 for utilities. Additionally, a line item with the amount of three hundred, thirty seven thousand, four hundred dollars (\$337,400.00), was extracted directly from the Ministry of Finance's budget, and was added to my ministry's budget, to defray costs of street lighting in East and West Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, as a result, The Ministry for Grand Bahama is now managing one hundred and eighty two (182) electricity accounts, and since my ministry has taken over this administrative responsibility, there has been no disconnection since July, 2014, the electricity accounts are all current, and relations with the Grand Bahama Power Company are healthier.

Hence, Mr. Speaker, an additional two million dollars (\$2,000,000.00) was allocated in my ministry's budget for 2015-2016, under Block 30. Line 303100, for the payment of electricity bills.

Mr. Speaker, my ministry is also now managing one hundred and five (105) water accounts. Of note is the drastic

decline in the water bills, which can be attributed to leaks being identified and fixed.

Mr. Speaker, I am happy to report that our efforts at becoming more efficient in managing scarce resources, is yielding great reward, as the former practice of delinquency and tardiness of payment in these areas is now alleviated, which is saving the government thousands of dollars in interest incurred on late payments.

Mr. Speaker, we will continue to responsibly manage the expenditure of our precious resources, as this proven strategy remains the center of this administration's campaign for reducing government spending, and our new economic reform policy.

Mr. Speaker, with the passing of each fiscal year, the Right Honourable Member for Centreville has communicated to this house, fiscally sound budgets that have slowly but surely begun the process of bringing our country back on the road to recovery. I remain confident that under his leadership, we will navigate the course with the continued, successful execution of our Vision 2030 and soon to be implemented, National Development Plan. To the side opposite and other detractors, I say Forward Onward! This administration will not be derailed or side tracked as we are, in the words of the late Abraham Lincoln: a "government of the people, by the people, for the people." We shall not be moved by political mischief, rhetoric or slander, as we progressively and collectively move toward building a Stronger Bahamas!

Mr. Speaker, I would like to commend the Right Honourable Member for Centreville and the Honourable Member for Golden Isles for preparing yet another budget that addresses the needs of Bahamians, allows for the strengthening of the economy of Grand Bahama and encourages private sector employment creation on this island. Revenue measures such as the reduction of select tariff and excise rates, and in some cases the elimination of duty altogether; the extension of duty free exemptions to build, renovate or repair residential and commercial buildings; the duty exemptions for returning residents; the proposed amendments to the Real Property Tax and the extension of the Family Island Development Encouragement Act for another year, which now incorporates the islands of Eleuthera, Bimini, Abaco and the outlying areas of Grand Bahama Island, are all designed to bring tax relief to Bahamian homeowners, consumers and businesses.

Mr. Speaker, the hurricane season is upon us and according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) forecast calls for a below-average season with six (6) to eleven (11) named storms, three (3) to six (6) hurricanes, and zero (0) to two (2) major hurricanes, category storms ranging from three (3) to five (5). Mr. Speaker, this is certainly good news, particularly for Grand Bahama, as this administration cannot afford any further delays in realizing the long awaited, projects which were promised to the people of Grand Bahama. Mr. Speaker, this by no means suggests that we let our guards down. I would like to caution all Bahamians, particularly in Grand Bahama, to always be prepared and stay tuned to our local radio newscast to keep abreast of all storm and hurricane activity reports.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker, today, our nation faces tremendous fiscal and economic challenges and, if nothing is done, the livelihood and security of future generations will be in jeopardy.

In response, Mr. Speaker, the 2015-2016 budget communication, which the Right Honourable Member for Centerville introduced to this august Chamber, is a roadmap to begin tackling these challenges with positive solutions. It is a plan that seeks to reduce our deficit and national debt, secure and strengthen vital programs such as National Health Insurance, provide our uniformed officers with the resources they need to protect Bahamian families, and make the government of The Bahamas more efficient, effective and accountable to hard-working taxpayers. In this budget, we have embraced the innovative spirit of the Bahamian people by putting forth policies that can deliver real results and that empower individuals, families, job creators and our communities to build a stronger, more secure future.

Mr. Speaker, this administration's vision of a Stronger Bahamas will only become a reality if all Bahamians are active participants in its implementation. As President Barack Obama said, "in this country, we rise or fall as one nation, as one people. Let's resist the temptation to fall back on the same partisanship and pettiness and immaturity that has

poisoned our politics for so long.” This confirms the fact that while the government has to play its role, it is also the responsibility of the local communities, employers, employees and other stakeholders, to pool their resources for the common goal of this vision.

Mr. Speaker, I am optimistic about the fact that many of Grand Bahama’s pressing needs are now being addressed and as a result of the allocations in this budget, we are better positioned to solve many of our long standing challenges.

Mr. Speaker, the year 2015 will indeed be an exciting year for Grand Bahama Island. Over the next few months we anticipate expansion in our industrial, maritime and touristic sectors which will create more entrepreneurial and employment opportunities.

Therefore, as I close, Mr. Speaker, I encourage the business community and residents of Grand Bahama to join with me, as we build a stronger Grand Bahama, and a stronger Bahamas.

With these words, Pineridge supports the 2015-2016 budget.