



PARLIAMENT OF THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

State Opening and Budget Address Second Meeting of the 2023/2024 Session *Second Sitting*

Monday
11 December, 2023
(Pages 1-68)

Hon. Sir Alden McLaughlin
Speaker

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PRESENT WERE:

Hon. Sir Alden McLaughlin, KCMG, MBE, KC, JP, MP
Speaker

MINISTERS OF THE CABINET

Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly, JP, MP	Premier and Minister of Finance, Education and District Administration & Lands
Hon. André M. Ebanks, MP	<i>Deputy Premier</i> , Minister of Financial Services & Commerce <i>and</i> Investment, Innovation & Social Development
Hon. Johany S. Ebanks, MP	Minister of Planning, Agriculture, Housing, Infrastructure and Transport & Development
Hon. V. Kenneth Bryan, MP	Minister of Tourism & Ports
Hon. Sabrina T. Turner, MP	Minister of Health & Wellness and Home Affairs
Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks, MP	Minister of Sustainability & Climate Resiliency
Hon. Isaac D. Rankine, JP, MP	Minister of Youth, Sports and Heritage
Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour, JP, MP	Minister of Border Control & Labour and Culture

EX OFFICIO MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

Hon. Franz I. Manderson, MBE, Cert Hon, JP	<i>Deputy Governor</i> , ex officio Member responsible for the Portfolio of the Civil Service
Hon. Samuel W. Bulgin, KC, JP	<i>Attorney General</i> , ex officio Member responsible for the Portfolio of Legal Affairs

ELECTED MEMBERS

GOVERNMENT BACKBENCHERS

Hon. Heather D. Bodden, OCI, Cert. Hon., JP, MP	<i>Deputy Speaker</i> , Parliamentary Secretary to Tourism <i>and</i> Social Development, Elected Member for Savannah
Hon. W. McKeever Bush, JP, MP	Elected Member for West Bay West
Mr. Bernie A. Bush, MP	Elected Member for West Bay North

OPPOSITION MEMBERS

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, JP, MP	<i>Leader of the Opposition</i> , Elected Member for George Town East
Mr. Joseph X. Hew, MP	<i>Deputy Leader of the Opposition</i> , Elected Member for George Town North
Mr. Moses I. Kirkconnell, JP, MP	Elected Member for Cayman Brac West and Little Cayman
Ms. Barbara E. Connolly, JP, NP, MP	Elected Member for George Town South
Mr. David C. Wight, JP, MP	Elected Member for George Town West

INDEPENDENT OPPOSITION MEMBERS

Mr. Christopher S. Saunders, MP	Elected Member for Bodden Town West
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APOLOGIES

Hon. G. Wayne Panton, JP, MP	Elected Member for Newlands
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OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT
STATE OPENING AND BUDGET ADDRESS
SECOND MEETING OF THE 2023/24 SESSION
MONDAY
11 DECEMBER, 2023
10.28 A.M.
Second Sitting

[Hon. Alden McLaughlin, Speaker, presiding]

The Speaker: Good morning.

This meeting of Parliament is resumed. I will now call on the Honourable Leader of the Opposition to grace us with prayers.

PRAYERS

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition, Elected Member for George Town East: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Good morning colleagues.

Let us pray:

Almighty God from whom all wisdom and power are derived: We beseech Thee to direct and prosper the deliberations of the Parliament now assembled, that all things may be ordered upon the best and surest foundations for the glory of Thy name and for the safety, honour and welfare of the people of these Islands.

Bless our Sovereign, King Charles, III; William, Prince of Wales and all the Royal Family. Give grace to all who exercise authority in our Commonwealth, that peace and happiness; truth and justice; religion and piety may be established among us. Especially we pray for the Governor of our Islands, the Premier, the Speaker of the Parliament, Leader of the Opposition, Ministers of the Cabinet, ex-officio Members, Members of the Parliament, the Chief Justice and Members of the Judiciary that we may be enabled faithfully to perform the responsible duties of our high office. All this we ask for Thy great name's sake.

Let us say the Lord's Prayer together:

Our Father, who art in heaven; hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord make His face shine upon us and be gracious unto us. The Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon us and give us peace, now and always.

Amen.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

**READING BY THE HONOURABLE
SPEAKER OF MESSAGES AND
ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Speaker: Members, I think we are all very keenly aware that we are under the gun as it relates to finishing the business of this Meeting before Christmas morning.

I just want to encourage all Members to be as efficient as they can in their delivery. Shakespeare said, "**Brevity is the soul of wit.**" However, it is not just the soul of wit; in this day and age when most people have very short attention spans, I promise you if you wax on for hours about things, which for most of them, they regard as irrelevant to their lives, they're going to tune you out. If you have something good and important to say, say it as quickly and efficiently as you can and move on. No matter how great the support that people have for you, I promise you that their brains can only absorb as much as their posteriors can suffer sitting to listen to you.

Let's see how quickly we can get through this. Let's start the Meetings as promptly as we can, let's resume when we finish the breaks as quickly as we can. I am going to say to you all that I am not going to wait for a quorum to start the Meeting of the House. There is no requirement. The requirement is a quorum to vote on any matter. So, if you hear the bell ring, please come running because unless the Premier says to me, there is some reason why the Government needs time to do something, that is a different matter; but generally we are going to try to get through this as quickly as possible.

I am going to reduce breaks to just twice for the day. If we go late into the night, then obviously, we will have to have another break, but we are going to try to go through this as efficiently as we possibly can. I do not believe, because of my many years of being on the receiving end of this, that it makes a great deal of sense to run the House until 1 and 2 o'clock in the morning because what happens then is Members are so exhausted that they come back late. Thus, unless we are nearing the end and Christmas is nigh, I am not going to run the House that late, but I think that we can expect to work until somewhere around 9 o'clock unless a Member is finishing up, then I will allow that to finish. I am going to start that from now so hopefully Christmas Eve does not catch us here. Thank you, Members.

Madam Clerk.

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

BILLS

SECOND READING

(Continuation of debate)

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEARS 2024 AND 2025) BILL, 2023

The Speaker: Debate on the Throne Speech, the Premier's budget address and policy statement is continued.

Does any Member wish to speak? *[Pause]*
The Honourable Leader of the Opposition?

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Pause]

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition: Mr. Speaker, I, again, warmly welcome you to the Speaker's Chair, and to be quite honest, sir, I am getting used to seeing you there.

I, also, once again, extend a welcome to our new Premier. I have said previously in this Parliament that the country has been crying out for and now needs stable and effective Government. The recent changes in the leadership of the Government coupled with this new budget have provided you, Madam Premier and your colleagues with an opportunity to provide that stability. I pray for your success in providing the leadership necessary to deliver on the promise of that opportunity. The country needs you to be successful.

I noticed with a smile the Premier's reference to us on the Opposition benches as friends. I welcome that and I can assure her that we too view her as a friend; not only of the Progressives but of the national interest. I am sure the Premier understands that one of the things good friends do is speak the truth to each other even when that is uncomfortable, and there will be some truths told here today.

Before continuing, I want to say that my colleagues and I were saddened on Friday to learn that the Member for Newlands had an unfortunate accident last week. We wish him a very speedy recovery and hope that he will be able to take his place in this Parliament during this session. I also wish to acknowledge the part that the Member for Newlands played in assisting the orderly transition of the Premiership once it became obvious that there was no alternative.

I may have differed with him on policy and the direction that the country was going and I will mention those differences here today, but I never doubted his patriotism. He has stepped aside as Premier to allow others on his team the opportunity to see if they can better lead their group and that deserves our respect.

Once he can return to this Chamber, I look forward to him speaking more freely about topics he deeply cares about including advocating for sustainability and the environment. I hope and expect that we may yet find common cause as he does so.

The country also needs a strong Opposition to help the Government to succeed. Over the past two years, in every critique of those in power and in every recommendation for change that we have made; that has been our aim. We help the country and Government best by supporting policies and actions we see as being in the public good but challenging those that fail that public good test.

I must also thank Her Excellency the Governor for excellently presenting her first Throne Speech to the Parliament. The Throne Speech is an important symbol of the constitutional ties between Cayman and the United Kingdom. A reminder of the shared history, values and mutual interests that bind us and underscore the enduring nature of our relationship. Our developing relationship with the UK is founded on Cayman taking responsibility for its own future.

The budget which we are here to debate is one of the central instruments available to us to express the local autonomy we enjoy. However, the budget is not simply about the details of the financial allocations that have been made. I understand that what is truly important are the choices and decisions that are made by a Government and which determine what will get done for our people.

Those choices are fundamentally political. The administration has made decisions to bring forward funding allocations for some things and not for others; to increase budgets in some areas and not in others; to spend rather than save. Those are political choices made by the new Premier and her United People's Movement (UPM) Government, so inevitably my response to the public presentation of the political choices the Government has made will also be political. I make no apology for that, Mr. Speaker. Disagreement about the choices being made, is the very [make up] of politics and this Parliament is the appropriate stage for such disagreements to be aired.

The budget sets the guide rails for how the Government responds to our country's challenges over the next two years. Whereas when we in the Opposition highlight disagreements, we do so either because we believe a better, more robust response to those challenges is possible, or because we believe that the choices that the Government are making are creating risks that are unnecessary for our country.

Sustainable Economic Growth

Mr. Speaker, let me highlight what I believe is the central issue that the new Premier must tackle that was too often neglected by her predecessor and the PACT Government. That important issue is the future of the Cayman Islands economy and the strategies we

need to drive sustainable economic growth. In so doing, I will point out that whilst it is important for us to focus on the economy in Grand Cayman and what is needed to drive growth here, we must also consider that our people in the Sister Islands need to grow the Cayman Brac and Little Cayman's economy, sustainably.

Achieving sustainable economic growth should be the top priority for any Government in the Cayman Islands. I emphasise that such growth needs to be sustainable in two senses. First, economic growth must be balanced by social and environmental concerns. Growth must be achieved in ways that enable us to tackle, not exacerbate social issues and growth must respect the environmental constraints of a small island nation facing the threats of a global climate emergency.

Secondly, growth needs to be sustainable in the long term. It should be built upon innovation and better productivity and it should deliver benefits to all who participate in the economy. For those who doubt the importance of economic growth as a priority, I point them to what the World Bank has recently observed. I quote: **"Economic growth is the foundation for social and economic development: it creates jobs, generates income opportunities, and helps reduce poverty. When it is inclusive and sustained, growth can also strengthen political and social stability. So it's not surprising that growth is at the top of most governments' agendas."**

Economic growth might be at the top of most government's agendas across the globe but sadly, it was not at the top of the agenda for the previous PACT Government.

The new Premier's policy speech on Friday got close, Mr. Speaker. She included in her remarks, a new vision that was different from her predecessor in two ways. First, her vision included a unified Government. Certainly, that would be very different from what has taken place before. She also suggested her Government would be focused on continuing our Island's ongoing economic recovery. I welcome her attempt to put the economy at the heart of her vision. However, as I will illustrate, continuing the path we are on is not good enough; she needs to change direction.

The former Premier's Strategic Policy Statement (SPS) set out what he called, "Five Broad Outcomes" that he stated represented the PACT Government's overarching aims for the future of our Islands. In the Premier's speech on Friday, the five broad outcomes were reiterated as the UPM Government's priorities. The achievement of a strong economy is not clearly identified as one of those five broad outcomes.

By way of contrast, Mr. Speaker, the last SPS that you and I presented to this Parliament during our term in office contained eight broad outcomes; the first of which was to deliver a strong economy to help families and businesses. That remains an outcome to which the Progressives are firmly committed.

I recognise that among what the SPS calls specific outcomes, some of the 20 listed outcomes would indeed contribute to economic growth, so it would not be fair to say that the PACT administration was completely ignoring economic growth; and that is not my claim here today. My point is that a strong economy and the achievement of sustainable economic growth were just not central to the thinking or actions of the last Premier and his Government.

Parliament may recall that two years ago in my contribution to the budget debate, I warned that throughout his long speech, the Premier did little to reassure anyone that his Government had a clear plan for supporting economic growth. And throughout his term in office, the former Premier continued to miss this important point.

PACT had no plan for a strong and stable economy two years ago; the new Premier's speech on Friday suggests that she is also failing to understand the challenges we face and underestimating what is necessary to rebuild a strong economy that benefits all of our people. I say we build a strong economy, because that was the position under the Progressives. We not only committed to a strong economy and achieving sustainable growth in our SPS, but that is what we delivered in practise.

Under the last two Progressive-led Governments, growth rates peaked at 3.8 per cent in 2019 prior to the pandemic, and Cayman enjoyed five years of consecutive growth, averaging 3 per cent through the end of 2019. I will talk a bit more about the benefits our track record brought as I go on. But first, let us look in some detail at the PACT's track record and why the new Government needs to switch direction.

The former Premier liked to proclaim what he described as the economic success of his Government and the Premier has taken up where he left off. They focus on headline numbers and never really seem to go into the detail. However, we only need to look past the Premier's headlines to find what the economic success story that successive administrations are trying to pass off on the country is exposed for what it really is.

The former Premier told the House in September of his personal pride at the achievement of headline real terms GDP growth in 2022 of 3.8 per cent. On its face, that does sound impressive, and certainly matches up to the growth rates consistently achieved by the Progressives-led administration of which I was part.

Why then am I not celebrating the economy's success? The problem is that headline GDP growth does not really tell us how well the country is doing. For that, we need to look at GDP per capita. As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) emphasises, **"Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is a core indicator of economic performance and commonly used as a broad measure of average living standards or economic well-being."** So if we want to understand living standards in

the Cayman Islands, we need to look at GDP per capita, specifically GDP per capita in constant prices; so as to eliminate the impact of inflation.

The Economics and Statistics Office's (ESO) very helpful Annual Economic Report for 2022 provides us with the data. Table three on page 13 shows that GDP per capita fluctuated but stayed relatively constant in real terms under the Progressives prior to the pandemic. That is the product of our steady, sustainable growth strategy.

However, under the PACT Government, GDP per capita fell off the edge of a cliff. The data shows that living standards across our Islands have dropped nearly 14 per cent in real terms compared with pre-pandemic levels on this key measure of relative prosperity. Perhaps more startling is a 10.5 per cent drop in 2022 alone. The drop was so significant that the ESO pointed to it and noted, **"Cayman's per capita income in real terms fell by 10.5 per cent to \$59,048 as a 16 per cent growth in the mid-year population outweighed the expansion in real income"**.

It is worth repeating that startling fact: 2022 saw a 10.5 per cent drop in GDP per capita in the Cayman Islands. That decrease in living standards is a product of the lack of any coherent economic strategy for which I criticised the PACT Government ever since they took office.

The reasons behind the steep drop in the per capita GDP are obvious. Under the Progressives, our approach to sustainable growth meant that the economy and the population grew in balance with each other. In contrast, the level of economic growth under the PACT Government remained modest while population growth has spiralled out of control.

In expanding, the GDP growth data that I referred to just now shows that by the end of 2022 the economy is around 2 per cent larger than at the end of 2019. However, Mr. Speaker, the population grew by over 18 per cent over the same period. The Government needs to urgently investigate why the country must have an 18 per cent increase in population to create only marginally more wealth than was created in 2019.

Is it any wonder that Caymanians are concerned about unexplained skyrocketing population growth? Is it any surprise that Caymanians fear the overcrowding of our Islands, if the Government's approach to the economy is eroding living standards by adding rapidly and significantly to the population while bringing little economic benefit?

Mr. Speaker, before I continue, I want to be very clear that I am not saying that stopping immigration will fix the problem. I will leave that posturing for those in the Government who complain and ask for immigration to be fixed yet have not said or articulated what they propose to fix it and how.

In her policy speech, I noted that the Premier spoke about the forthcoming Immigration Reform Bill. I urge her and the Minister of Border Control to consult

widely and think deeply before bringing forward such a Bill.

Mr. Speaker, we need to get it right. Part of getting things right on immigration is about the Government better understanding what is happening in the economy and determining how best to address it.

Allow me to explain why, in economic terms, this represents a current concern for the Cayman economy. During 2022 the number of workers in the Cayman Islands significantly increased. However, even with this rise in workforce size, the economic wealth created in 2022 is about the same as it was in 2019 when there were significantly fewer workers. Consequently, economists would deduce that the productivity per worker decreased considerably over the period. The ESO does not, I believe, produce data on productivity, but I have done some calculations showing the trend in productivity per worker over time.

My calculations suggest that productivity nosedived after the PACT's reopening of the economy. In 2022 alone, because of the startling increase in the number of people employed and with only a relatively small increase in the wealth produced in our economy, productivity in the Cayman economy declined by over 18 per cent. On a methodological point, in these calculations I have simply taken the numbers employed in each year from the ESO's Compendium of Statistics, as this is the only consistent data source available to me. Recognising there may be better data elsewhere, I have written to the ESO today asking them to produce a definitive set of calculations for productivity.

However, although my calculations are not perfect, the startling decline in productivity since reopening would still be clear in whatever calculations, the ESO produces. The absolute numbers may change but the pattern for the trend will remain. This matters because productivity is the key to future prosperity.

As the UK Office for National Statistics put it: **"Productivity is important because it is a key determinant of living standards in the long term. Increasing productivity over time allows businesses to produce more goods and services per unit of input. This ultimately enables higher wages, aids economic growth, increases profitability and boosts tax revenues."**

In short, productivity gains benefit workers, businesses and the Government. That is why every government across the globe is chasing increased productivity as a key political goal. Yet, we see as I have illustrated, productivity went rapidly into freefall under the PACT Government. The new Government must urgently get to grips with the issue because we know that the marked decline evident in 2022 figures has likely continued into 2023.

According to the Government's forecast, GDP will likely increase by 3.1 [per cent] this year; and we already know from the spring Labour Force Survey that the number of people employed in Cayman increased

by 8.5 per cent when compared to spring 2022. A modest 3.1 per cent in GDP this year combined with the 8.5 per cent growth in the workforce on the current trajectory suggests a further 5 per cent decline in productivity for this year.

That would mean that the overall reduction in productivity would be nearing 25 per cent over three years between the Progressives leaving office and the end of 2023. This decline in productivity is a glaring economic setback for the Cayman Islands and it represents a significant failure of the PACT administration; and that is why I am urging the new Premier to change direction.

In his statements to the House, the former Premier said, **“Over the near term, we expect labour demand to continue to track with the GDP growth forecast.”** The new Premier made a similar pronouncement in her budget address last Friday, stating that **“Labour demand is anticipated to align with GDP growth.”** The reality is that labour demand as measured by actual job numbers has been outstripping the rate of GDP growth throughout their term in office. Those trends are continuing, based on the latest information we have been able to see.

Labour demand cannot continue to track GDP growth when it has already diverged so significantly from it, and this is a critical issue that the new Government must confront urgently. The repercussions of neglecting to understand and address these economic challenges, are deeply affecting households across the country.

The former Premier's September statement to the House heavily relied upon his familiar “for the people” catch phrase— he used it fifteen times, by my count, Mr. Speaker, but repeating something over and over does not make it true. He told us that his Government was governing in the common interest. Looking out for all Caymanian families. He did not explain that this meant making Caymanian families poorer, but as the real term GDP per capita data shows, that is exactly what was happening on his and his colleagues watch.

Make no mistake, Mr. Speaker, thanks to the previous government's neglect of the issue, our people are suffering. Adding to the misery, are the consequences of crippling interest rates that are driving up both mortgage payments and rents. Look at the impact of the cost of living crisis on hard pressed Caymanian families. A crisis the government failed to see coming, despite my warnings two years ago in the last budget debate; and as I also reminded the then Premier, in our last budget address, it is the most vulnerable in our community who are hit hardest by the ravages of inflation.

Despite the full opening up of the economy, the number of persons requiring help from the Needs Assessment Unit (NAU) ballooned in 2022. The number receiving assistance climbed from 1,783 in 2021 to 2,591 in 2022. Mr. Speaker, that's an eye-watering increase of 45 per cent and at our September session,

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Social Development told the House of the continuing pressures this year on NAU budgets from those in need, so we know that there is a crisis and that it continues. The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that PACT was not a government bringing prosperity to all. It really was a government leaving people behind.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, while so many in our economy are needing help just to get by, under PACT, the number of very high earners in our economy rose significantly. The most recent Spring 2023 Labour Force Survey found that the proportion of workers in the highest salary bracket used in the survey, that is over \$8,400 of income per month, has more than doubled since 2019, from 4.5 per cent to 9.5 per cent. By way of comparison, Mr. Speaker, the increase in the proportion of the highest earning bracket stayed relatively constant under the Progressives. The proportion earning over 8,400 only rose from 4.1 per cent to 4.5 per cent between 2015 and 2019.

Again, Mr. Speaker to be fair to the PACT administration, I recognise that earnings' levels across the economy have risen since 2019; but we also know that once we factor in inflation, most families have felt their household income being squeezed over the last two years as their purchasing power has declined significantly. It is clear, though, that under PACT, the pain was not equally distributed, Mr. Speaker. While in real terms, earnings for most workers have, at best, stagnated, and for many have fallen. Life for those at the top end of the earnings ladder has continued to get better, and we need to look more closely still, to understand who it is that is better off under PACT.

In 2019, there were 75 per cent more Caymanians than non-Caymanians in the top earnings brackets. In 2023 (on PACT's watch), there are more non-Caymanians than Caymanians in that top bracket. It is staggering, that the rate of increase in the number of non-Caymanian top earners means that, as of this year, there are more of them than high earning Caymanians. In PACT's economy, the people feeling the benefit were those on the very top incomes, and in PACT's economy, those people are now disproportionately non-Caymanian—so much for the “for the people” mantra.

The whole approach to the economy needs to change, and I urge the new Premier to have the courage and strength to take a different road. Mr. Speaker, the question for the Premier to ask herself is: Do our people feel better off after 2.5 years of the Government's term? Apart from the wealthy at the top who, as we have seen, are increasingly non-Caymanian, I suspect the answer from most Caymanian families will be a resounding “no”.

We can see the evidence for that, Mr. Speaker, in the results of a Cayman Compass poll published last Monday. Following the usual practice of excluding those who don't know, the current UPM Government has a net favourability rating of minus 60 per cent, with 68 per cent having no confidence in them, and only 8 per cent viewing them favourably. That's a huge deficit,

and it means that the new Government has a mountain to climb if it is to gain the confidence of the people. Now, Mr. Speaker, I acknowledge this was nothing more than a straw poll, not a proper...

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition: Scientific survey— that's the word I was looking for, sir, thank you. Not a scientific survey.

Understandably, the comments made by participants in the poll reflect the fact that the Members of the current government are the same as those in the previous government who failed to grasp the challenges facing the country, notably on the cost of living. The change in name cannot hide that fact, Mr. Speaker. The evidence from the Compass' poll is clear: our people are crying out for a new direction, and for a government they can believe in. I do hope that the Members of the Government are listening and understand that we need a real change in direction; that means delivering real change, not just talking about it.

"The truth is staring us in the face. The gap is widening. Lower income Caymanians are sleeping in their cars, unable to afford rent. Our middle class is under assault". Those are not my words, Mr. Speaker, that quotation comes directly from the first Budget Policy Statement made by the former Premier in this House, two years ago. Mr. Speaker, over the last two years, things have gotten worse for the PACT Government. The reality of what is happening in our economy is overwhelmingly apparent to those who take the time and trouble to understand it. Let me summarise for us all, where we are right now:

- Living standards across our Islands are dropping overall;
- The Cayman economy is seeing massive and unprecedented declines in productivity;
- The real incomes of most Caymanian households are feeling squeezed, while those at the top receive the benefits; and
- Those seeing the improvements at the top of the earnings ladder, are increasingly non-Caymanian.

Sadly, that is the reality of our economy. Sadly, that is the everyday experience for most Caymanian families. Given that reality, a new Premier, leading a reformed government and presenting a new budget, should be an opportunity to reset course and to get the Cayman Islands and its economy back on track, while offering robust solutions to the challenges our Islands and our people are facing.

I said in this Parliament, that we in the Opposition would give the Premier and her government some leeway. A course correction is needed, and we recognise it takes some time, so we are willing to provide the new Premier with the space she needs; but we must see signs that the necessary changes in course are indeed happening. Most importantly, as we go through

the budget in detail, we need to see those changes in priorities in the budget documents presented here. If we look at the budget overall, the signs are not encouraging. The fault line that ran through PACT's two-year budget was its use of all available revenues to finance the extravagant spending plans, and its consequent reliance on massive new debt to fund capital expenditure plans.

Mr. Speaker, the UPM Administration has doubled down on that approach with borrowing to be further increased by up to \$150 million over the next two years. Let us not forget that PACT already borrowed some \$340-odd million in drawing down the line of credit. That means, that over their four-year combined term in office, Mr. Speaker, whatever name they go under, the Ministers opposite would have added a staggering half a billion dollars of new borrowing to the Government's books.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition: Facts speak for themselves.

The reality is that the capital projects announced by the UPM will inevitably necessitate much more borrowing than that. The \$150 million in the next two years will become much more than that, as projects that have just started in the current period, are taken to completion. The Premier needs to tell the country how much would need to be borrowed, to fully deliver all the projects in the UPM's list.

As I've said many times, the willingness of PACT (and now the UPM) to borrow to finance its capital spending plans, is a mistake that is saddling future generations with the bill for their grand plans, while also creating a free-for-all when it comes to operational expenditures and, as I predicted two years ago, once the taps are turned on, they are very difficult to turn off. Not only does such profligacy mean that the Government is spending all its revenues today on projects that deliver little or no benefit; but it also means that surpluses are not being generated to help guard against future shocks, or to help fund future investments. The folly of that approach was exposed by September's Infrastructure Spotlight Report published by KPMG.

That report estimates that total capital expenditure of \$1.2 billion is necessary, over the next five years, simply to deliver the infrastructure projects that the PACT Government committed itself to deliver. As I have said, we are yet to see what the capital spending plans of the UPM Government truly add up to, but it is worth remembering, Mr. Speaker, that the infrastructure list costed by KPMG only reflected the then-government's stated plans. What is not on the list, of course, are the other projects contained in this budget.

Moreover, what we have before us is just a long wish-list of projects that have no coherent plan or strategy behind them. One of the key reasons that PACT failed to think-through comprehensive plans for

infrastructure requirements in the coming years, is that they have kicked work on the National Development Plan into the long grass, despite the former Premier's initial promises to deliver such a plan.

The Member for George Town North has repeatedly reminded the Government of the urgent need to continue the work that started under the Progressives. If a new National Development Plan was important when the Progressives were in office, it has become very urgent now, due to the PACT's population explosion. The Premier indicated that the work on a plan would be progressed. I hope the Minister will give us more detail when he gets up to speak. Once identified, all those infrastructure needs will have to be properly financed, and resources found, to deliver them.

Mr. Speaker, on top of the vast borrowing needed to fund what is already planned by the UPM, we were led to believe that the former Premier was mulling over a request to the UK to relax the borrowing limits set out in the Framework for Fiscal Responsibility (FFR). His Government was not generating surpluses to help fund the investment that he believed was needed for climate change mitigation and adaptation measures, so once more, he proposed to resort to ever more borrowing. It would be helpful to all of us, Mr. Speaker, to understand if the Premier intends to make such an approach to the UK government.

Mr. Speaker, I'm a firm believer in the FFR. It is useful in ensuring that fiscal discipline is applied even by those whose instincts are to ignore such discipline, but in principle, if the government needs to make investment decisions that potentially conflict with the FFR, then it should be able to make the case to the UK to relax the rules. However, and I cannot stress this enough, Mr. Speaker, that case must be rigorously made based on specific costed investment plans. It must not be yet another free-for-all, for Ministers to pursue yet more of their pet projects.

We agree with the former Premier that there is a need for Cayman to invest in climate change adaption and mitigation measures. Climate change is a global emergency, but its local impact in Cayman is, potentially, an existential threat. Indeed, we hoped we would see firmer proposals for action as part of this budget process, but while the PACT Government published a grand strategy for climate change full of commendable aspirations, a comprehensive plan, with detailed cost assessments, remains absent. Unfortunately, the recently launched Climate Change Strategy does not have the necessary detail, or clarity, over costs and benefit that we, and the UK, would need to see if a change in the FFR is to be supported.

I will say more on this subject later, Mr. Speaker, but in addition, while there may be a case for borrowing to fund investment, future borrowing still needs to be financed. If the government adds new debts to be paid from current revenue streams, they'll worsen the problem already caused by the previous

PACT Administration. PACT's strategy— raise-it-and-spend-it without restraint— has squeezed operational budgets leaving no space to handle the pressure that borrowing for significant investments will bring.

Mr. Speaker, it looked like the previous PACT Administration intended to raise fees and charges, or introduce new ones, to finance the new debt it wanted to incur, and to pay for Ministers' profligate spending in an attempt to balance the budget.

In recent weeks, the government has been drip-feeding information about new or increased fees. For example, we saw increased airport charges to finance the latest phase of airport improvements. A 136 per cent hike in charges from a total of \$14 to \$33 per passenger is being imposed. Don't forget, Mr. Speaker, that these charges do not just apply to tourists. Every Caymanian who travels off island will be included in the charges that airlines collect and pay to the government.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Minister of Tourism & Ports, Elected Member for George Town Central:

Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of elucidation— if the Member would give way.

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition: No, sir.

The Speaker: No, sir?

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition: Yes.

The Speaker: The Member will not give way.

Point of Order

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order.

The Speaker: What is your point of order?

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: The Member—

The Speaker: Honourable Leader of the Opposition, can you resume your seat?

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: The Member is misleading this House by giving incorrect figures with respect to the percentages and the amounts increased at the Airports Authority. He just said that, reportedly, it was \$33, however, the increase in amounts were five and ten [dollars], which amounted to \$14 [sic].

The Speaker: Honourable Minister, I have no way of knowing whether he is right, or you are right. When you have the opportunity to speak, you can address that issue. I can't say he is misleading the House because I don't know.

Please resume, Honourable Leader.

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Whether I'm right or I am wrong, there is clearly a significant increase in these fees; and a point that I make, that cannot be disputed, is that every Caymanian who travels overseas will have to pay these fees collected by the airlines and paid over to government. It will be passed on to them. We are told too, Mr. Speaker, that there are planned hikes in fees and duties; some \$52 million of new revenues expected in 2024, and \$80 million in 2025.

I do believe that the information that was given on Friday was not complete in that we did not know by how much the specific fees and rates were going to be increased, and the expected revenue sources for it; but let me emphasise, again, that these fee increases are only necessary to fund the excessive spending plans of Ministers because of the absence of setting priorities and Ministers thinking they can just go on another spending spree with other people's money. This is indeed, nothing more than a continuation of the PACT Government's raise-it-and-spend-it strategy.

Mr. Speaker, I have to make it clear too, just how fortunate we, and the government, have been that revenues have been buoyant over the last two years. They're not going down; by any measure, they ought to be able to live within the means that are created by a country generating over \$1 billion in recurrent revenues.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition: First, the government has benefited from significant changes in the revenue system introduced towards the end of the last Progressives-led Government.

I'm particularly thinking of the private funds fees that have brought tens of millions of dollars of new revenues into government's coffers. Secondly, the government has benefited from inflation directly, as higher import prices have necessarily led to higher-than-expected import duty receipts; and third, the higher interest rates that have been introduced to combat inflation have led to higher returns on government's investments.

It is worth noting that by the end of the third quarter of 2023, excess investment income now amounts to nearly \$20 million of the overall positive variances in income against budget in the CI Government's unaudited accounts. If in the end, the government does achieve close to its revised SPS income target, it will be this unbudgeted investment income that is, to a large extent, the cause. The gains from inflation were unexpected and unbudgeted, and in that sense, they represent a windfall to the government.

My colleagues and I constantly argue that such windfalls should be used to help ease the burden of inflation on hard-pressed businesses and families. This includes businesses and families in the Sister Islands,

who I believe are feeling the impact of the cost of living crisis even more sharply than we do here in Grand Cayman. It is essential that the government does find an opportunity to provide further duty reductions to the Sister Islands, to help lower costs for our people there, including the small businesses fighting to survive. My colleague, the Member for Cayman Brac West and Little Cayman, will speak more fulsomely on this when he rises, and I look forward to hearing his thoughts.

Given the PACT's "for the people" rhetoric, we were somewhat surprised that it was so reluctant to use the windfalls to support our people in need; however, more recently, as a precarious state of government finances has become clearer, it has become obvious why the former Premier wanted to hoard these windfalls, even while local people were suffering—he needed those windfalls to offset the continued high spending by his Ministers. Without them, even the wafer-thin surplus the then Premier hoped to achieve, would have been impossible.

During the last Finance Committee meeting, the Financial Secretary reassured us that the chances of a deficit were low because it was improbable that all the requested budget allocations would be fully spent. The former Premier also agreed, hoping that there would be underspending. It seems, from the government's third quarter results, that their optimism may have been well placed, however, hoping for and depending upon government's bureaucratic inefficiency to avoid a deficit, is hardly a sound financial strategy. Cayman needs a much more disciplined approach, rather than what I have previously characterised as the PACT playing fast and loose with the nation's finances.

That brings me back to my central point, Mr. Speaker, about the need for proper prioritisation. My colleagues and I have been criticised in some quarters for advocating actions that would necessitate increased government spending, while at the same time blaming Ministers opposite for their lack of restraint over spending. However, this is not a question of any double standards from the Opposition. Instead, it is a question of the need for government to spend its limited resources in the best way possible, by prioritising spending properly.

Indeed, rather than the Opposition wanting to have its cake and eat it, the problem we face is that Government Ministers want to eat every cake in the store. As I made clear in the statement I issued after the Finance Committee, it was irresponsible of Ministers to simply add \$69 million to government spending plans without first identifying savings that would offset that expenditure. This is why every Member of the Opposition abstained on the votes taken in Finance Committee. We did not vote against the line item increases either, because the money was effectively already spent in the case of the health care costs, or because we agreed with the need for additional spending.

For example, the Member for George Town South has been campaigning for improvements to the

teaching of mathematics in our public schools. We were pleased that the Minister responded to that campaign. We support the appointment of fourteen new specialist mathematics teachers in our Primary schools, and we recognise that there will be a price tag attached. Our argument is not with that initiative—we support it—but we believe Ministers should have looked for room in existing budgets to cover the costs first, before seeking Supplementary approvals. Supplementary approvals, I might add, that they acknowledged they probably wouldn't spend fully.

I realise that advocating that approach in turn, this begs two questions of the Opposition: First, if prioritisation is so important, what would our priorities be; and secondly, if savings are necessary to fund future spending, where would we identify such changes.

Let me quickly dispose of that second question. On one level, it should not be necessary for us to identify savings. It was widely reported that back in August, the former Premier ordered civil servants to find 8.5 per cent reductions in spending totalling \$47 million in the current year, and the then Premier's Memorandum rightly noted, that savings identified in 2023 would form the basis for budgets in 2024 and beyond, so the issue is directly relevant to the debate we are having.

The now Premier was not only a contributor to the savings exercise, but she should also now be the beneficiary of it as she presents the Budget to the House.

If the Government has secured \$47 million of savings already, the focus should now shift from debating their existence to determine how much of those savings should be spent on other priorities and how much should be held back. If the Premier, in her capacity as Minister of Finance, can be transparent and tell us how much of the \$47 million has been integrated into the budgets before us, then we can have that discussion, Mr. Speaker.

If it turns out that the Government has not made \$47 million of savings or that more savings are now necessary, then as we scrutinise the budget in Finance Committee, I do think it is beholden on all of us to try to identify opportunities to save costs. Certainly as the Opposition, we will seek to challenge spending plans where appropriate.

That said, Mr. Speaker, the real issue is not about what the Government does with a potential \$47 million of savings, but about how the \$1 billion of core government spending could be better focused to deliver actions that would make a real difference for Caymanians now and in the future.

I mentioned the former PACT Government Strategic Policy Statement earlier, Mr. Speaker. The five broad outcomes it established are so broad as to be meaningless as a guide for government action. I was somewhat alarmed in truth that the new Premier did not signal a clearer change in direction by replacing those five with something more meaningful. If she is also sticking with the 20 'specific outcomes' in the SPS, then

those give a better indication of things that might actually be achievable over the next two years. The problem is, that those 20 outcomes between them cover just about everything that the Government conceivably might do. As the saying goes, **"when everything is a priority, nothing is a priority"**.

Opposition's Budget Priorities

What I want to spend the remainder of my available time on Mr. Speaker, is setting out what we in the Opposition see as priorities for government action that should be central to this budget. In all cases, I know that Ministers will point to things in the budget and claim that action is being taken. Our point, Mr. Speaker, is not that these things are completely missing from the government's current plans, but rather, we believe that this UPM Government needs to be relentlessly focused on them, and that actions need to be taken fast enough and effectively enough to make the difference that needs to be made. Instead of 20 different things, we would urge the Premier to think about seven key priorities this budget can focus on.

Three of those priorities are about tackling what [are] the most pressing challenges currently facing Cayman. Those are:

1. To overcome the ongoing impacts of the cost of living crisis.
2. To reduce crime and the fear of crime.
3. To enable better, more affordable access to housing.

The other four priorities are areas where action in the next two years covered by this budget is necessary to meet immediate challenges and better prepare Cayman for the future. They are:

1. To fully restore Cayman's economy to a path of steady sustainable growth;
2. To accelerate action to mitigate climate change and to adapt to its impacts;
3. To resolve Grand Cayman's worsening traffic issues; and
4. To respond positively to the challenges of an aging population.

On the cost of living crisis, we still believe that there is an imperative towards government action. I spoke briefly earlier about the devastating effect of the cost of living crisis on many Caymanian families. In truth, I have spoken about it many times before; both in Parliament and outside. I have also criticised the former Premier, first for being slow to respond and then for not doing enough. I also wrote to him on more than one occasion following recommendations on things that could be done.

Mr. Speaker, if you might allow me to Table the two letters that I wrote to him; one in June 2022, the second one in July 2023.

The Speaker: May I see them?
They appear to be yours.

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition:
Thank you, sir.

The Speaker: So ordered.

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition:
As those two documents show, I wrote to him on two occasions offering recommendations on things that could be done. The danger now, is that with the rate of inflation slowing, the new UPM Government will breathe a sigh of relief and once more take its eye off the ball.

I say 'slowing' advisedly, Mr. Speaker. With the second quarter headline inflation figure falling to 4.1 per cent from 6.6 per cent the previous quarter, one might think there were grounds for optimism. However, the second quarter figure still means prices are rising; it's just that they are rising less quickly than before. Also, in the detail of the figures, we can see that it is the prices of the things that households spend the most money on every week, every month, every day of the year, that are still climbing the fastest: huge household utility cost price increases of 15.3 per cent for electricity, 10 per cent for water, housing rents up by 9 per cent, grocery bills continue soaring as food and beverage prices go up by 7 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, honestly, I don't know how it is that people are surviving, because we know that salaries and compensation are not anywhere near in helping them to meet this level of price increases. Therefore, what you're finding [is] your standard of living is declining; and I spoke to that at length earlier.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, these price rises over the last year must be added to the price rises experienced in the first year of the PACT Administration. We now have the information on which to judge two years of government performance. The latest consumer price index report tells us that in June 2023, prices overall were 18.3 per cent higher than in March 2021; the last time prices were measured before the PACT Government took office. We know that this level of price increases is still hurting countless thousands of Caymanian families.

We in the Opposition have spent months advocating measures that would have brought genuine relief to hard pressed families and businesses. We believe there are a number of those actions that still should be taken.

To bring relief to all families and businesses alike, we would temporarily reduce to zero per cent, the duty paid by utility providers on fuel, the duty on cooking gas and fuel duty at the pumps. Such a reduction through 2024, coupled with a freeze for the year on the Water Authority water rates would bring immediate relief in the monthly bills which are currently causing real

hardships for many, targeting those costs that are continuing to increase the fastest and creating breathing space for families at a time when they still need it.

If that measure is about universal relief, we recognise, as I have said, that the most vulnerable are often the worst hit by inflation. We therefore welcome the last government's response to our campaign for an increase that saw stipends paid to retired seamen and veterans and those dependent on financial assistance from the government from \$950 to \$1250 a month.

In response to a motion brought to the House in October by the honourable Member for Red Bay, the Minister of Social Development agreed to consider further increases to \$1,500 for seamen, veterans, pensioners, and those needing long-term financial assistance. It was also agreed that the Public Service Pensions (Ex-Gratia Uplift Payments) Regulations should be amended so that the minimum pension that a civil servant would receive be increased so that all civil service pensioners would receive a pension of at least that paid to older persons receiving permanent financial assistance from the government. Again, those were demands made by the Opposition and we are grateful for the response that has been received and we look forward to hearing and having further discords with the Minister with regard to his agreement to consider further increases to take it to \$1,500.

I was delighted to hear the new Premier confirm in her first speech to Parliament in the role, that pensions for long-serving civil servants will be increased to \$1,250 per month. We will be looking to see these necessary increases implemented as part of the 2024-2025 budget, and we will continue to make the case for an increase to \$1,500 a month for those in need of government support.

We also recognise that the national minimum wage needs to be increased. This has a distinction of being something that was started by the Progressives and committed to by PACT in its first Strategic Policy Statement. In my response to the SPS nearly two and a half years ago, I urged the then Premier to complete the work we had started, but that had been held up during the pandemic.

In his first budget policy statement in November 2021, the former Premier committed to reconvening the minimum wage committee early in the New Year. As with so much else for which he was responsible, this was delayed and the Committee did not finally meet until January 2023. That led to further delays. However, I understand that the report was handed to the Government at the end of October. We are awaiting now, Government's response to the report. More importantly, those Caymanians and expatriate workers struggling to get by on a minimum wage of \$6, that according to the Minimum Wage Review Committee Chairman, is already 50 cents below starvation level, are still waiting. I hope the Minister of Labour will confirm that the report will now be picked up and actioned by the Government because that wait must now end.

Finally on this topic, Mr. Speaker, we believe that civil servants should also receive cost of living increases over the course of the next two years. I am sure that civil servants would have welcomed the one-off payment of \$1,500 announced by the Premier in November. However, we know that for many, this money will only allow them to pay off bills incurred as their real wages fell in value over the past two years.

The Opposition has argued for over a year that a cost of living allowance (COLA) for civil servants was warranted and we have argued that it was affordable from the windfall income to the Government that I mentioned earlier. As the UPM has now decided to raise fees and duties, we believe that additional income would be better used in restoring, in real terms, income of hard pressed civil servants than on more of Ministers' spending plans.

Sadly, Mr. Speaker, we cannot avoid talking about a crime problem here in Cayman. While we must not talk up the issue of Cayman [sic] [crime], Cayman is, let's all agree, a relatively safe place to live, work and to visit, but I do believe that neither must we be blind to it nor ignore it. Not only is incidence of crime itself an issue we must tackle, I recognise that as levels of crime have increased, so has the fear and concern felt by people in our communities.

I have spoken publicly before about the Progressives 10-point plan that we believe will help achieve a reduction in crime both in response to today's problems and in the longer term, and to reassure the public. Those 10 key actions should be the priorities that the UPM ensures come through in the budget. I'm not going to go through all 10 of them, but I want to highlight a few now, Mr. Speaker.

I welcome two initiatives mentioned by the Premier in her Policy Speech on Friday. Investment in the rehabilitation of offenders is something we advocate [for], and continues the policy Progressives put in place while in government. More must be done to help reduce reoffending rates including offering enhanced support to those leaving prisons so that they can avoid being drawn into a return to criminality. That means enhancing the training and other opportunities available to offenders while in prison and supporting them to access employment and other necessary support in their release.

I also welcome plans to upgrade Cayman's closed circuit television (CCTV) system. However, the Premier seemed to suggest that this was about collecting more specific sets of data. Mr. Speaker, I say to the Premier, CCTVs are needed as a big part of our efforts to deter and catch criminals. I hope the Minister of Home Affairs can reassure us that her plans are more ambitious, and that we will see these issues addressed.

The most significant immediate priority needs to be more direct action by the Police Service to disrupt criminal gangs, target prolific and persistent offenders and achieve more arrests and convictions. I welcome Commissioner Kurt Walton to his post, and I offer him

the wholehearted support of the Progressives, but he, I am sure, knows that our communities need to see him achieving results quickly. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, we have seen in the last week where quick arrests have been made in the case of grievous murders that took place in our communities.

The elected government has a role to make sure that the Commissioner has the resources he needs to take the action necessary, and we will scrutinise allocations of police funding in this budget to ensure that our Police Service can do an effective job in keeping our people safe. That means not just allocating more money but also being clear about the results to be achieved through the extra investment. Accountability needs to apply to the Police Service just as much as it needs [to] elsewhere in the public sector.

The final part of our anti-crime plan that I wish to highlight is in my view, the most significant. We must prevent our young people from getting involved with gangs and divert them away from criminality. This is the action that will have the most impact in the long term, not just on the safety of our communities, but on the improved life chances it will create for so many young Caymanians.

While in government, we worked with the National Security Council to develop an anti-gang strategy that included youth diversion activities as well as disruption to existing gang activity. Working with nongovernmental agencies. We were developing an early intervention action plan to identify and work with young people at risk to keep them out of gangs and pursuing more productive lives. That work must be brought to fruition and resources made available to support the implementation of the plan.

In my response to the first PACT budget at the end of 2021, I noted that the Government had committed to progressing the anti-gang work we had started. However, I also noted that this is a complex issue that requires a serious response across government and that there appeared to be no resources made available in the budget to deliver the kind of solutions that are necessary. I challenged the former Premier to show that he was serious about this work by identifying the resources that would be needed to make such a strategy effective. He did not respond to my challenge. Sadly, I have to say there is no evidence that anything meaningful has really happened on this issue over the past two years.

Thus, I reiterate the challenge, by now asking the new Premier to get this vital work moving once again. Tell us what you will do to implement an effective anti-gang strategy and successful youth diversion activities.

Let us now consider the challenges facing the country on housing, Mr. Speaker.

Again, I will go back to the former Premier's Budget Policy Statement two years ago. In that speech, he pointed to two-bedroom apartments costing up-

wards of \$400,000 and asked, *how many people making \$3,000 a month can afford that?* Well, one thing did change on his watch, there are precious few apartments going for \$400,000 anymore, as the prices of apartments and houses have skyrocketed.

According to the 2023 Labour Force Survey, about one-third of Caymanian earners still earn at or below the salary band that includes \$3,000. That is the same proportion of Caymanian earners who were at or under that bracket when PACT took office if we go by the Fall 2020 survey.

Further, things are no better in the rental sector. I have already mentioned that the latest inflation report from the Economics and Statistics Office (ESO) tells us that actual rents in the market had gone up by 9 per cent in the 12 months to June. If we go back and look at the corresponding report for the second quarter of 2022, we see the rents paid by tenants had increased by 10.8 per cent. That is a 20 per cent rise in housing rents in just over two years, Mr Speaker. This should not surprise anyone in this room because I know all of you on the Government Bench and us in the Opposition, we hear the cries, [and] we get the calls from our constituents seeking help in paying rent.

Housing affordability is understandably one of the major concerns for Caymanians, and it must be a priority for the UPM Government to tackle.

Just for one moment a few weeks ago, I thought the PACT Government had finally woken up to that fact. The weekly news release issued by the Government had the headline “Bold Steps to Address Housing Challenges”.

At last! I thought, but I was soon disappointed as I read the article itself. The ‘bold step’—singular, not plural—is the appointment of consultants to devise a new policy on affordable housing and an accompanying 10-year plan. The ‘bold step’ is nothing but a plan to have a plan.

What of the work already done by the Progressives administration on housing prior to the onset of COVID-19? What of the work done by the PACT Government’s own housing committee? Was that work all for nothing?

While my heart sank at realising the promised ‘bold steps’ were no such thing, I do want to recognise there is value in this work. I understand that the housing crisis is a long-term problem that cannot be solved in one budget cycle; it’s not likely.

I also want to thank the Minister for including Opposition Members in the work that the consultants will be doing. Solving the problem is something we all should be working on, and I am grateful to him for his recognition of the value that the Opposition can add.

However, the work on developing a policy needs to take place alongside immediate action, not instead of it. We in the Opposition have made very clear the immediate actions that the new Government needs to take, both to provide some immediate help to hard-

pressed families and the action that will help in the longer term.

At the September sitting of the House, the Honourable Member for George Town North brought not one, but two motions to the House that would help ease the current housing crisis.

The proposal to work with banks to relaunch the Government Guaranteed Home Assisted Mortgage (GGHAM) Programme is simply common sense. We all know of young families who would like to own their home and whose income would allow them to make the necessary mortgage repayments but who cannot raise a down payment. Their inability to save the necessary amount is compounded by the ever-increasing rents they are being required to pay while waiting to get on the housing ladder.

For those families, the Caymanian dream of home ownership is just getting ever further away. The Government needs to step in and give them the helping hand they need, and it needs to do so immediately.

I hope the new Government will act swiftly on that Motion rather than replicating the old PACT delays.

Members will recall that it was back in June 2022, that the Member for George Town West proposed a motion to Parliament to adjust key stamp duty thresholds. The proposals, which were unanimously agreed by Parliament, included an increase in thresholds to allow homes costing up to \$500,000 to be purchased stamp duty free and amounts above that to be charged at two per cent duty, and a reduction for all Caymanians purchasing property from seven and a half to five per cent.

Yet it took until this September, 15 months after the Motion was passed, for the former Premier to bring forward a package of changes to stamp duty thresholds. His proposals were not quite the same as those envisaged by the Motion but we are grateful for them nonetheless. I thank him for the changes that he has made.

We eagerly await the legislative changes to come to Parliament to formalise these changes. He indicated that until the legislation can come to this Parliament, that in his capacity as Minister of Finance he was approving waivers in accordance with the terms which he shared in Parliament. I do hope the current Premier will continue that policy.

Whether the Caymanian homebuyers who made their purchases in the 15 months between the Motion passing in June 2022 and the announcement of the new thresholds in September 2023 and have consequently missed out, would thank him, I am not so sure.

I should also say that I hope the benefits to Caymanians are not negated by the stamp duty increases announced on Friday, about which we are still awaiting details. It will be interesting to see whether these will genuinely be non-inflationary for average

Caymanians. In my experience, Mr Speaker, I've observed that nearly every tax increase has a tangible effect on people's wallets in some way, shape or form.

The second Motion brought by the Member for George Town North was to work with private sector developers to bring forward more affordable housing units for ownership and for rent. This was work we had already started while in office, and to be honest, Mr Speaker, we thought that this Motion, too, was just plain common sense.

However, it had the effect of throwing the Government benches into complete disarray with Ministers unable to make their minds up whether they supported the Motion or not.

Well, I am pleased the Motion passed in the end, and I would like to hear from the Premier that her Government will get on and implement it.

The Member for George Town North gave the Government plenty of new ideas for things they could do to incentivise the private sector to deliver a greater number of affordable homes.

Finally on this topic, the Government needs to find more creative solutions to help ease the pressures and the ever-rising rents in Cayman's rented housing sector.

This could in part be tackled through working with private sector developers as the Member for George Town North explained as he proposed the Motion I have just mentioned, Mr Speaker.

However, such is the extent of the problem that we now need to consider even more radical solutions. I believe that now is the time for us to consider creating one or more 'social landlord schemes.' Such organisations own, maintain, and lease properties in the market but do so to cover costs and not make a profit. This could be a function taken on by the National Housing Development Trust or perhaps by a non-profit organisation supported and enabled by the Government, at least at the outset.

There is work to do to develop this idea, but unless we start the necessary work now, we will never get to the point where we have a social landlord operating successfully in the Cayman Islands.

Those are the three priorities that address the most immediate challenges facing Cayman right now; but what of the longer term priorities that I outlined? Unsurprisingly, given the analysis I laid out for the Parliament earlier, one of the longer term priorities advocated by the Opposition is to restore Cayman's economy to a path of steady, sustainable growth. The consequences of the former Premier's lack of a strategy for the future of our economy are crystal clear, as I outlined previously.

I think we all understand that for the foreseeable future, financial services and tourism will remain the major pillars of Cayman's economy. We in the Opposition welcome the recent announcements that the Cayman Islands was removed from the Financial Action Task Force's grey list of jurisdictions. I would like to join

with the Premier in recognising the huge effort made by Minister of Financial Services and others in Government and in the private sector who collaborated and worked diligently to achieve this result.

The Speaker: Honourable Leader.

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition: Yes, Sir.

The Speaker: You shouldn't leave out the Attorney General (AG).

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition: I was just going to correct myself, sir.

I would have to dial it back to when I mentioned the Minister of Financial Services, include in that the Honourable Attorney General for his commitment and perseverance.

I had the privilege of working with him in the last Government, during the Progressives term in office, and I am just amazed at the gentleman's commitment and his perseverance and his great desire to achieve the result that we have achieved. Well done, sir. Well done.

However, I would say that we believe that lobbying efforts and the promotion of Cayman as a leading offshore jurisdiction more generally, would have been greatly enhanced through the early opening of the overseas offices planned by the last Progressives-led government, with the advice of the financial services sector. Instead of immediately recognising the need for those offices, the PACT administration chose to go through audits and investigations into the actions of civil servants taken to implement the policy of the then current Government.

The impacts of the consequent delays in getting overseas offices off the ground are still being felt. I reiterate my recent call for the Government to redouble its efforts and open an office in Brussels to engage with the EU and its member states directly and regularly. That is the area where the biggest threat comes to Cayman; and while we may have escaped and have now been removed from the grey list, we know the threat remains and is ever present to us. We are being watched and Cayman continues to be held to a higher standard than everyone else.

The Premier in her policy statement on Friday recognised the importance of the Cayman Islands telling our story directly to key decision makers. We need to continue to invest in that storytelling. This is not a time for complacency and I know that the Minister knows that. Such is Cayman's success as an offshore financial centre that there will always be jealous eyes watching us and competitor jurisdictions seeking to hold us back and get a leg up on what we do.

I note that the Minister's statement since the meeting in Paris have pledged to maintain vigilance and we in the Opposition welcome that commitment.

Also, I would say we pledge our support to you in your efforts, Minister. We also welcome his view and that of the industry that the delisting offers Cayman a platform on which we can build for future success. I agree, Mr. Speaker.

If the future for financial services is looking more positive, the same cannot be said for our tourism industry. However much the Premier and Minister of Tourism talk things up, the reality is that our stay over tourism sector is still not back to where it was before the pandemic. The air arrival numbers for this year continue to track well below 2019 figures, despite the complete lifting of restrictions.

Overall, for the 10 months to October, visitor numbers are some 16 per cent lower than pre-pandemic levels. If visitor numbers for the final two months of this year continue that trajectory, arrivals this year would have fallen back to almost precisely the 2017 numbers. I pointed out to the Minister in July, that at that point in the year, this reduction in visitor numbers represented a loss to the real economy of about \$90 million. To update the figures the full year effect of a 16.2 per cent reduction in visitor numbers is estimated at over \$160 million.

Hotel bed capacity which had been consistently growing before the pandemic is now 4 per cent lower even with a new hotel coming on stream next year, we will not be back on the previous growth strategy. What capacity growth there is currently in the stay-over sector is being driven by apartments and guest houses, which of course, do not create the same employment opportunities as hotels and are often not attracting the premium tourism guests we are told that the country needs to attract. Mr. Speaker, when I talk of the apartments and guest houses, I am talking about the Airbnb market.

At the same time, the cruise sector continues to struggle. The former Premier told the House in September that cruise ship numbers are recovering well. In fact, cruise arrivals for the first 10 months of 2023 were 31 per cent lower than the corresponding figure in 2019. This year, cruise tourism arrivals will be at their lowest for more than 20 years.

The Premier in her remarks on Friday suggested that the Minister of Tourism is very confident that we are on track for full tourism recovery by the end of the year. The conclusion the former Premier drew in his September statement in the House is that after the difficulties of the pandemic period, **“the tourism industry has rebounded even stronger.”**

To repeat what I have just said in the stay over sectors, numbers are 16.2 per cent down and on par with 2017; in the cruise sector numbers are 31 per cent down and will be at their lowest level for at least 20 years. There will not be the promised full recovery by the end of the year. The conclusion is that the tourism industry is still, very much significantly weaker, not stronger.

In his first public statement under the new regime, the tourism minister heralded the September visitor numbers as representing a momentous year for tourism; adding that this year has exceeded our expectations. Really, I think all this really shows is that the Minister had set a very low expectation of 70 per cent, rather than that the numbers were good.

The Minister remains particularly blind to the problem being faced in the cruise industry. His statement proclaimed, **“From a cruise perspective, we look forward to seeing a continued increase in the number of ships calling into Grand Cayman.”** ‘A continued increase’...really?

As I have said, the cruise numbers this year will be lower than at any time in the last 20 years. Perhaps more worrying is that cruise arrival numbers in recent months are now tracking below even the levels of 2022 when we were still seeking to gain traction after a later reopening than some rival destinations. In the five months of June to October 2023 cruise ship numbers were 15 per cent down compared even with 2022.

In short, for Cayman’s cruise industry, the problems are acute and they are getting worse. By contrast, cruise ship numbers have fully recovered to 2019 levels in jurisdictions such as Trinidad and Tobago; they are over 40 per cent higher than in 2019 in the Bahamas; and they have more than doubled in the Dominican Republic over pre-pandemic levels. At the same time, stayover visitor numbers have fully recovered to 2019 levels and beyond across much of the Caribbean and Central America. In stark contrast with Cayman, our Islands rank only 20th out of 27 destinations in terms of visitor numbers so far in 2023 when compared to 2019.

The issues we face in our tourism industry are not a post pandemic problem. They are a Cayman Islands problem and the Minister needs to turn his attention to the issue and address it head on. The conclusion that we in the Opposition draw from the continued struggles in the sector is that we do need a rethink.

We argued from the outset that the right time for that rethink was while tourism numbers were still low in the wake of the restrictions brought on by the pandemic when both Government and the industry had the chance to come together to plan for what the sector would look like in the future.

The business case for the \$42 million private jet terminal at the airport is largely justified by what the report calls its, **“significant unquantifiable benefits”**. The Minister was reported as stating that the expenditure was justified because the terminal would bring in more high net worth individuals and that this would eventually benefit local people through trickle-down economics.

While promising jam tomorrow, it is now clear that the new terminal means pain today. It proposed to pay for this new luxury facility for the extremely wealthy by putting the burden on everyone else. Instead of users of the new terminal footing the bill, the Cabinet has

imposed a \$15 airport development fee on all passengers to fund the current phase of improvements, including the new private jet terminal.

Passengers, visitors, and Caymanians alike, who will only be able to see the new facility in the distance will be putting their hands in their pockets to pay for it. No wonder the International Air Transport Association has criticised the charges as discriminatory and contrary to the International Civil Aviation Organisations charging policies.

At least the airport business case attempts to justify the proposed investment. The air link with Barbados and the new Minister's tourism attraction on North Church Street, both seem to lack any business case justification at all. That said, I was pleased to read confirmation that Barbados has signed up to a minimum income guarantee that removes any direct financial risk for Cayman Airways. However, as the saying goes, *the devil is in the details* and the details in the agreement are not all known.

We need to look beyond our two pillar industries if we are to build steady, sustainable growth and we need to attract higher skilled, higher paid jobs if we are to reverse the startling decline in productivity on PACT's watch that I mentioned earlier.

It is increasingly important that we look to diversify our economy. Many countries across the globe are pursuing this goal, so competition for investment dollars is significant; but we cannot win the competition if we do not enter. For the last 2.5 years, we have been failing to compete while other jurisdictions develop their economies in new directions.

Instead of watching while others prosper, Cayman needs to win investor confidence, both by talking up the acknowledged strength of our jurisdiction and by seeking to build on the platform that the last two Progressives-led governments developed in emerging sectors. There are things we can build on if we apply ourselves to the task. Under the Progressives, Cayman had a growing reputation in the digital industries; supported, for example, by our ground-breaking legislation to protect intellectual property; and our strong health services sector brought significant investment into Cayman and as we left office, was set to bring more.

Our manifesto at the election, set out clearly how Cayman's economy could build upon those strengths, proposing the creation of two innovation hubs: one in digital knowledge-based industries and one in health sciences. That was a good idea at the time of the election and it is a good idea today.

Establishing such hubs would encourage entrepreneurship and creativity; harnessing both Caymanian talent and foreign investment. These industries are the key to sustainable growth, improving productivity, increasing prosperity and creating future jobs. We need to ensure we have in place both the education and adult training systems that will support Caymanians to be in the best position to compete for those higher skilled, higher wage earning jobs.

We have said many times, we remain supportive of the policy direction being taken by the new Premier in her role as Minister of Education. However, my colleague, the honourable Member for George Town South has spent the last 2.5 years challenging the Minister of Education to try to push for more effective implementation. She will speak more about what needs to be done in her debate, Mr. Speaker.

As we go into the detailed scrutiny of the education budget in Finance Committee, we will be seeking the Minister's reassurances that she still shares the Progressives' ambition for education, ambitions that she campaigned on alongside us at the last election.

However, while we often focus on education, let me remind the Premier that most of the people who will be in the future workforce of 2030 and beyond are already in the workforce. A strategy that fails to recognise the need to develop those workers will continue to sell Caymanians short. I know that the Minister of Education has very recently introduced new Technical, Vocational and Education Training (TVET) grants to help with skills development. I welcome it, but it needs better focus and targeting.

Under the Progressives, Workforce [Opportunities] and Residency Cayman (WORC) was tasked with developing a future workforce plan. If we understand what the future workforce needs to look like, we can identify skill gaps and develop training programmes to plug those gaps. This is work that PACT has failed to do, but the UPM should now pick up. The money that the Minister has identified for TVET grants could then be targeted to support that specific objective.

While most of what I have spoken about concerns the future of our economy, we must not lose sight of the folks who need help right now. That was the purpose of a motion that we brought to the House at the September sitting proposed by the honourable Member for George Town North. You will recall that the Motion advocated a mechanism through which the Government could support those who are finding it difficult to access work to get on a pathway to full time employment. The Member will speak more on this matter during the debate, Mr. Speaker, and I know that the Minister responsible will listen to what he has to say.

Climate change is an area where, given the former Premier's rhetoric and reputation, I had expected we would see the PACT Government leading the way; but let's be honest, little has been achieved. We supported the need for climate change policy. We were disappointed that it took two years to produce and to be honest, we were equally disappointed by the content.

After two years of work, a prioritised list of risks that Cayman should be addressing was published in the draft policy. In my view, the climate threats to flora and fauna at the top of the list, while very important, need to be distinguished from the potentially catastrophic impacts on the people who live and work in the Cayman Islands.

The Progressives welcome and support action to tackle the potential disruption of turtle populations and to try to support coral flourishing; but what we really want to see, as I said earlier, is a properly worked out and costed plan setting out the adaptations Cayman needs to make to face up to the climate challenges that will most heavily impact our people.

Let us subject the former Premier's climate change policy to one central test. Having identified the vulnerability of coastal settlements, buildings and infrastructure, does the policy clearly set out what actions are necessary to mitigate the identified risk? Does it tell us how much those actions will cost and how they will be paid for? Does it tell us when those actions will be taken care of and by whom? Sadly, the answer to those questions is "no".

Without answering those questions, the policy takes us no further forward. Now that we have a new dedicated Minister in place, able to drive things forward, I urge her to better focus her efforts. The current climate change policy contains some 47 actions that are described as short-term priorities; and given the timescale of 2023 to 2025... As I have said previously, when everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.

Instead of 47 different things, let the new Minister focus instead on doing the work needed to meet the central tests that I have just set out: developing a properly costed plan to meet the challenges facing our coastal communities and by extension, probably our entire population. Creating such a plan ready for the next Government to pick up and start to deliver would be a strong legacy for the UPM to leave.

Alongside that work, the UPM must prioritise moving forward with Project ReGen. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition will talk about ReGen in more detail, but I would like to remind Parliament that the project remains the single most significant contribution that this Government could make to sustainability. Yet, instead of being embraced and driven forward, it has been subject to endless dithering and delay.

At the end of September, yet another deadline set by the former Premier for the financial close of the contract was missed—and as a reminder, that deadline was a full two years after the original deadline set by the Progressives-led government. The most recent long stop date of 30th November has also been missed, since we have had no public announcement of the contract being completed. The Premier's only mention of waste management on Friday was a commitment to continuously improve the current solid waste management of the landfills.

What conclusion, then, should the country therefore draw from her silence on ReGen? I asked her to clarify her Government's position on this vitally important project. I remind this honourable House, I remind the public, I know that there are those who do not support the ReGen project but there is no other alternative. For our part, we have no doubt that we must now drive forward with the implementation of ReGen.

As I said, it significantly contributes to Cayman's sustainability ambitions.

Regarding traffic concerns, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition has proposed several measures to ease congestion that were being implemented when he was Minister of Transport. Fortunately, the Minister for Works has largely contributed to the road improvements begun under our administration which will help some with the traffic woes, but we need a modern public transport as a major part of the solution.

When in office, the Deputy Leader started efforts to develop a comprehensive long-term public transportation plan and regrettably the Government decided it needed to start all over again. Then the Minister with responsibility for transport, the Member for George Town Central, told us just after taking office that his goal was to transform our approach to public transportation; despite there being work on transforming public transport begun by the Progressives that he could have picked up.

It was not until November 2022, 18 months after taking office that he launched a consultancy study to design a solution. We in the Opposition were sceptical of the Minister's approach, fearing the study might have been designed simply to confirm his preconceived ideas. Now that the consultants' report is finally in the public domain, we see our fears were confirmed. The study was too focused on buses and different options for their operation to be able to consider more radical options and solutions.

Nonetheless, we should not let the great be the enemy of the good. Rather than once more starting again, the Government needs to tell us how the work to choose the best option for a new bus service will be taken forward and how that solution will be implemented including its financing.

It was somewhat alarming that the current Minister responsible for releasing the report was focused on the bureaucratic rearrangement of responsibilities advocated in the report while remaining silent on the transport solution itself. If the silence means no solution is coming forward, then presumably we will not find appropriate measures in the budget to implement any changes whatsoever. This pushes back once more, any hope of delivering a new public transport system anytime soon, meaning that congestion will only get worse and carbon dioxide emissions will continue to increase.

Mr. Speaker, we must make progress on public transport any further dithering would be bad news for commuters, bad news for those who need access to modern public transport and bad news for the environment. The final priority I want to speak to is to address the challenges of a rapidly aging population.

The Speaker: Honourable Leader, I don't want to catch you unawares.

You've got about nine minutes.

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition:
I have about five minutes left, sir.

The Speaker: Perfect.

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition:
I will end on time.

The final priority I want to speak to is to address the challenges of a rapidly aging population. Like climate change, the challenges of an aging population are a global phenomenon. Analysis by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) of population trends published this summer, concluded that, **“What is fast becoming universal is that population aging is the most pervasive and dominant global demographic trend owing to declining fertility, increasing longevity and the progression of large cohorts into older ages.”** And as with climate change, we can see those global trends being played out here in Cayman.

The 2021 Census found that the number of people over 65 had just about doubled since the previous census in 2010, while this 50 to 64 year old group had grown by nearly 75 per cent in the same period. Cayman’s population has aged rapidly in a short time and all the indicators are that it will continue to do so.

Recognising the emerging trend towards ageing, the last Progressives administration overhauled the government’s approach, and in 2016, we put the Cayman Islands Older Persons Policy in place. We updated the necessary legislation and brought the Council for Older Persons into being.

The objectives of the policy remain as relevant today as when we agreed them. They focus on promoting better access to services, ensuring social inclusion so that our elderly feel valued and can live with dignity, promoting anti-discriminatory practices, and promoting the quality of life and well-being of older persons.

All such long-term policies need to be reviewed, Mr Speaker. Seven years on, such a review of the Older Persons Policy is overdue, but the census data, coupled with the last three years’ experience, has made the need for a review much more urgent. Whatever happens with the overarching policy, there is an immediate need for pension and health insurance reform.

One of the things that I commended the former Premier on during the last budget debate was what I called his apparent willingness to face up to the problems in both our health insurance and pension systems. I thought it was clear to both of us that these systems, already creaking prior to the pandemic, had been stretched beyond breaking point.

Sadly, it seems that the former Premier’s willingness to face up to these problems was more apparent than real. Little has been done over the last two years to bring forward the much-needed reform of our pension and health insurance regimes. Again, I urge the new Premier not to let this continue.

More recently, it seems, the Government has shown a little willingness to move the issue forward. In October, a public statement from the Deputy Director of Pensions suggested that the Government is considering changes to contribution rates and the retirement age. However, such movement as there is in the Government’s approach, has been limited to the drafting of tender documents for an actuarial study. Two years after the budget debate, where action was promised, the Government is only now getting around to drafting tender documents. This is not good enough.

If we all agree that the Pensions Law is outdated and that the system it created is not fit for purpose, then the Government must get on with it and fix it. With an ageing population and a cost-of-living crisis still with us, the need for change is becoming ever more urgent. This must be a priority for the 16 months or so this UPM Government has in office.

The need for changes to the health insurance regime is, if anything, even more pressing. The Government’s need to ask Finance Committee in September to vote through an additional \$31 million of expenditure to meet the healthcare costs of indigents and the cost of tertiary healthcare overseas is testament enough to our broken system.

One of the alarming data points from the census was that, despite the legislative requirements, only 9 out of 10 Caymanians have health insurance. That means 10 per cent are uninsured and this situation is completely unsustainable.

Government action has been limited. In April 2022, we were told by the then Minister of Finance that changes to the remit of CINICO to allow it to operate in new markets would diversify risks to both CINICO and the Government. The rollout was due before the start of this year, but it is not clear what has actually been done as yet. The CINICO website does not yet seem to offer insurance plans to the younger, healthier residents that the Minister envisaged. The Premier’s speech on Friday talked again about an enhanced role for CINICO in broader insurance markets coming into effect next year.

We will wait and see what benefits emerge from any changes that might be made; but, in any case, these changes are insufficient to deliver the significant systemic improvements needed. Again, I cautioned against this in my budget speech two years ago as I warned that while liberalising the restrictions on CINICO might be part of the answer, it was not a substitute for a well thought through system reform.

We, in the Opposition, would be willing to work with the Government to bring forward meaningful reform in both pensions and health insurance. I hope the new Premier will be willing to meet with me to discuss how that might be achieved.

Among the longer-term changes that the older persons’ policy review will need to look at, particular thought must be given to how we meet the health and

care needs of an ever-growing number of older persons. While I am not sure we will need to develop new initiatives that promote health and well-being, an inevitable consequence of increased longevity is greater levels of care needed and increased incidence of illness. Sadly, that is likely to mean an increased number of older persons living with long-term conditions and more living with complex co-morbidities. This means that the demand for health and care services is likely to increase exponentially.

I commend the work of the Health Services Authority to plan for and respond to the likely trend through the employment this summer of a new specialist geriatrician and the expansion in its range of geriatric clinics. This, however, is only part of the answer. Clinical interventions are important, but meeting the ongoing care needs of elderly persons in their own homes also needs much more attention.

There is already a limited private sector market on-Island for the provision of some care services. However, that market needs to grow, and the range of services available needs to expand to take in more complex needs. The Government should take the lead now in planning for and stimulating the growth of that market. It is much better that we develop the market in advance of the expected increases in the numbers needing care rather than wait for a further crisis in services for older persons to occur.

One example of that is workforce development. We need to plan for the number of extra care workers that will be needed and make sure that Caymanians are developing the skills to take the jobs that will be available in the sector. Many of these will be skilled, professional jobs with strong career paths. We should begin now to equip young Caymanians for those jobs and those careers than we import yet more foreign care workers.

Higher up the scale of need, we know that we will need to care for many more of our older persons—

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I rise as I notice that the clock, as according to our Standing Orders has expired for the Honourable Leader of Opposition in respect of his contributions to the debate.

The Speaker: I am very well aware of that, Honourable Minister.

Thank you for pointing it out, but if you have a look at the Standing Orders you will see that the Standing Orders accord the Speaker the discretion to allow the Member to wind up his or her speech.

I would encourage you, Mr. Leader, to so do.

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition: This is all I have left here.

[Pause]

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition: Mr. Speaker, higher up the scale of need, we know that we will need to care for many more of our older persons living with dementia.

This is only, in part, an issue about healthcare for the sufferers. The new HSA provision I mentioned will include some dementia services, though I suspect this will not be nearly enough looking ahead. Certainly, we will need to see more nursing home provisions, and the Government must work with the private sector to plan for the number of future places that will likely be necessary.

More broadly, we must also be ready to support people living with the disease in community settings, and that, in turn, means a whole community attuned to their needs. I therefore welcome the work being led by the Alzheimer's and Dementia Association of the Cayman Islands to make the Cayman Islands a dementia-friendly tourism destination, and I hope that work can be broadened to become community-wide rather than tourism sector-specific.

I understand the Minister of Tourism has pledged to support the Association's initiative. Having rightly criticised him for his lack of leadership in the tourism sector, I must thank him for the leadership he has shown in that respect. I hope that the Government more generally can be persuaded to put more resources into this much needed work and there will be tangible evidence of their support in the budget.

As a former Minister of Finance, I know how difficult it is to put together a budget. When I had that task, however, Mr Speaker, I had your leadership, as Premier, to support me. You helped ensure budget bids were coherently aligned with our strategic policy statement objectives. When necessary, you kept us working through long sessions to make sure we made the hard choices necessary to balance spending against the scarce resources available and to ensure that substantial surpluses were delivered.

Our financial strategy had been clear from the outset. We would deliver the public services our people needed while reducing fees and duties where possible. We made capital investments from the revenue generated so that we needed no new borrowing, and instead, we paid down debt.

In contrast, this UPM Government has thrown fiscal responsibility out of the window. New fees and charges imposed in this budget raise \$52 million in 2024, and then \$80 million thereafter. In this budget alone, the burden of \$150 million of new debt will be placed on the backs of future generations who will still be repaying it.

I will repeat what I said earlier. This takes the new debt incurred by this Government in its various guises over its 4-year term to a genuinely staggering half a billion dollars. Overnight, we have moved from a position where under the Progressives, 100 per cent of capital expenditures were financed by recurrent revenues, to one that is almost 100 per cent financed by

borrowing. Our commercial banks will be salivating at this opportunity to bid on providing new financing to Government. Caymanians will be paying for the excesses of those on the Government benches for decades to come, but there is an alternative. We need to end the raise-it-spend-it approach. We need to stop spending on vanity projects. We need to come back to living within our means.

To do that, the country needs a much clearer focus on a smaller number of priorities – things that will have the biggest impact on our people today and that will make the biggest difference in the long term.

I have set out today what I believe those priorities should be. I have also shared some fundamental and perhaps hard truths with my friends across the aisle. I urge the Premier to listen to what I have said and complete the necessary course change before [any] more damage is done to our country, economy, and people.

In closing, I stand before this Parliament not only as the Leader and main voice of Opposition but also as a steadfast believer in the incredible potential of our country and its people. In the discourse on fiscal policy and economic growth, let us never forget the heartbeat of our endeavours—our people.

As I noted at the start, our true measure of success isn't solely reflected in numbers on a budget plan but in the thriving communities, the aspirations fulfilled, and the opportunities we help create for every individual on our Islands. We have the potential to craft a landscape where innovation, entrepreneurship, and hard work converge to foster an environment where our people flourish, where dreams take flight, and where no aspiration is beyond reach. To realise that potential, the Government must focus relentlessly on the things that matter most to our people. It must drive forward the implementation of critical priorities instead of being beset by further dithering and delay.

Now is the time to draw a line under the last two and a half years of frustration and disappointment. Let us instead look to our shared future. Together, let's embark on this journey forward, toward a future where our revitalised economy once again provides opportunities for all, and where the spirit of our people is the cornerstone of our success.

Let us build a tomorrow where prosperity isn't just a dream but a reality for every citizen of our beloved Cayman Islands. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and may God bless these beautiful Cayman Islands.

[Desk thumping]

The Speaker: Thank you, Mr. Leader.

Does any other Member wish to speak?

[Pause] The Minister of Health and Wellness and Home Affairs.

[Pause]

Hon. Sabrina T. Turner, Minister of Health & Wellness and Home Affairs, Elected Member for Prospect: Honourable Speaker, Members of Parliament, and fellow Caymanians.

I stand before you today with a profound sense of duty, responsibility and gratitude as we assemble to discuss the 2024/2025 budget for the Cayman Islands. This budget is a road map, representing our collective vision for a safe, resilient and secure Cayman Islands, focused on national security, public safety and improving the wellbeing of our people.

As a people we are not unfamiliar with facing adversity, and our ability to cope with the difficult, and at times even the extraordinary, is how we have developed the remarkable resilience for which we are known, that continues to serve us well to this day. It is in the spirit of that resilience, that I deliver this address to this honourable Parliament today.

Mr. Speaker, I want to assure this honourable Parliament and the wider public alike, that we are committed to fiscal responsibility. This budget has been crafted with a keen eye on financial prudence, ensuring that every dollar is spent wisely for the benefit of our people, whether it relates to tackling security risks and delivering public safety services or safeguarding the health and wellness of the nation by ensuring access to health care interventions, preventative services, awareness and education. Our primary goal is to allocate resources efficiently in order to meet the pressing needs of our communities while safeguarding the long-term financial health of our Islands. This has required us to make difficult strategic investment decisions.

Our financial services sector continues to be a bedrock of our economy, providing stability and a significant source of revenue. Tourism, too, is making a strong comeback as global travel reopens and direct flights to the Cayman Islands have expanded. Yes, Mr. Speaker, the economic outlook is somewhat promising, but we have not reached where we are by luck.

To ensure long-term prosperity we must remain vigilant and proactive in our concerted effort to maintain the integrity of our key economic pillars. The safety and security of these Islands in its broadest sense, is the foundation that enables our tourism and financial sectors to thrive, and it requires strategic investments in national security, public safety, and—as COVID taught us, public health and a robust national healthcare structure. My vision is that healthcare will one day become another key pillar for economic growth and stability of our Islands.

As I stand before you to present the recent accomplishments and future aspirations of my two ministries, I first must highlight that the value of the work which the Ministry of Health & Wellness and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) deliver far exceeds that which can be quantified by dollars and cents.

I have often spoken of how people-driven I am, and offered examples of how people-driven my minis-

tries are. The Ministry of Health & Wellness, its statutory authorities including the country's largest healthcare provider, the Health Services Authority, and departments such as Environmental Health and the Mosquito Research and Control Unit (MRCU), all play a vital role in providing a quality of life and our people access to public health necessities that are not common in other jurisdictions. These departments affect each and every one of us on these Islands on a daily basis, from providing quality healthcare, to ensuring public health is safe through daily garbage collections and mosquito control, keeping dengue and other mosquito borne diseases at a reduced level.

Similarly, the Ministry of Home Affairs ensures that our people and infrastructure are protected at all times, and offers rehabilitation for those who have committed offences, so that they can be assimilated back into our society.

At surface level, my two ministries are vastly different in their needs and outputs but at their core they are quite similar: their work saves lives! The truth is, their success fuels this entire Government, as without them our residents would not be able to do their jobs, enjoy their neighbourhoods and public areas, take risks in the playground and football fields, feel safe or be protected in an emergency. My ministries, Mr. Speaker, are people-centred.

I will first speak to the Ministry of Home Affairs. MHA continues to meet and exceeds its responsibility for furthering public safety and resiliency of the Cayman Islands through continued strategic and operational improvement relevant to national security, emergency response, disaster relief, and offender management services. MHA's strategic direction prioritises people development, corporate and client wellness, national policy, service excellence, partnership and alignment. Also, public awareness with the vision to build a safer Cayman Islands community through innovative and effective solutions in public safety.

We have been very deliberate in building capabilities, through talent and technology, this positions Home Affairs as a truly intelligence-led Ministry. This is to ensure that our policies are in fact solutions that are based on a deep and comprehensive understanding of the enduring security and public safety issues facing our Islands.

Since assuming this post, I have seen Home Affairs and its entities resurge by leaps and bounds. Our policymaking and decision making have strengthened our national public safety capabilities and synergised our work with the rest of the Government. In the coming financial year, we would like to remain on this trend by developing more national policy solutions that will directly address public safety matters. This includes: focusing on youth leadership development within our uniformed services, emergency communications, fire and rescue services, disaster relief and national security, and the detention and rehabilitation of offenders.

I listened keenly to the Member of the Opposition and I am pleased to say that within this address, many of what he has mentioned is actually addressed, if not already begun. All policies are in place to make sure that they will be achieved within this budget cycle.

As I mentioned before, MHA is an intelligence-driven Ministry and we will continue to strengthen our capabilities so our policy development is curated to suit the true needs of the Caymanian people. By investing in current technology that will advance our national security and public safety goals. We also plan to invest in our tangible assets such as fit-for-purpose vessels and fleets that will give our officers in fire service, custodial management and disaster response the support they need to perform their duties.

These intentions would be for naught if we did not actively begin to nurture our pool of talent here in the Cayman Islands. Through our Cayman Islands Cadet Corps and its affiliates, we also plan to develop discipline-oriented youth leadership programming—in fact, we have already begun—that directs our young people in public safety career pathways.

We also hope to strengthen our existing human resources by creating a culture of learning and development throughout the Ministry of Home Affairs so we can deliver world class service in key areas such as criminal justice, offender management, emergency and disaster response and public safety communications.

Indeed, we are elevating the status of Home Affairs so that our young people will aspire to wearing one of our national crests, so that persons with malicious intent will reconsider wayward behaviour, so that the Cayman Islands will command the international respect it rightly deserves.

I will briefly touch on the specific goals of the Ministry's entities. To demonstrate the alignment and collaboration that resounds through all our subject areas, our Fire Service has set two strategic objectives, the first being to 'Elevate Professionalism and Succession Preparedness through Comprehensive Training, Development and Profession Certification Maintenance'. This will be done by strategically investing in comprehensive training and development programmes to current personnel with updated knowledge and skills, both technical and soft; collaborating with the Cadet Corps to ensure availability of a well-prepared talent pool for succession planning; implementing structured career development paths for Caymanian firefighters; and providing them with mentorship, secondment opportunities and specialised training.

The second objective, is to 'Enhance Emergency Response Capabilities and Foster Partnerships'. We aim to achieve this by maintaining our 24/7 domestic and aviation emergency response capabilities; making strategic investments in training, equipment, personnel and buildings; immersing fire personnel in practical exercises that will empower them to handle diverse incidents, including fires, hazardous materials

spills and natural disasters and fostering collaboration with other emergency response agencies and partners.

The Fire Service plans to accomplish all this while cultivating a culture of excellence and integrity throughout their ranks. Again, demonstrating the alignment throughout the Ministry of Home Affairs.

This is similar to their comrades at His Majesty's Prison Service who have made Strengthening their Security and Integrity a primary objective. How will this be achieved, Mr. Speaker? By training prison officers for their current and future roles within the service; promoting ownership and dedication amongst officers; adapting expertise from other jurisdictions and supporting that with a robust framework that is aligned with international standards; proactively addressing security risks and evolving challenges while safeguarding both staff and the broader community.

The second objective of our Prison Service focuses on the men and women who have committed offences and require rehabilitation.

As I alluded to earlier, through synergies with the Department of Community Rehabilitation and other partner agencies, the Prison Service will forge agreements for holistic, evidence-based interventions. The service will also enhance their technical and vocational offerings to inmates, so that they will be equipped with the skills necessary for reintegration into the workforce, their families, and the community as a whole.

By and large Mr. Speaker, this does not just include the elected arm, it will include our nation as a whole. We have found that people are less embracing of offenders who want to be reintegrated back into society and have found countless roadblocks used against them. We will do our best, as a Government, to make sure that this culture changes. A sharper focus has been taken on inmates' mental health and the therapeutic services to address pre-existing challenges that might have led them to offences. Collectively, these actions feed into the overarching goal to reduce recidivism amongst offenders. Mr. Speaker, every step taken by the Prison Service will also be aligned with [the] intelligence-driven approach of the Ministry.

I will now take this time to applaud another MHA entity, the Department of Public Safety Communications, for the work it has done. Mr. Speaker, the workload for this Department has continued to rise based on the growing population in the Cayman Islands. As an example, I can share that the call volume for the 911 Communications Centre has consistently increased over the past three years. In 2021, there was an average of 4,864 calls per month and a total of 58,372 calls for the year. In 2022, the Department received an average of 5,228 calls per month and a total of 66,766 calls for the year. In 2023, the monthly average of calls taken is at 8,300 calls, with approximately 4,000 of these calls being dispatched for emergency services. This year alone, Mr. Speaker, the team has

fielded a total of 99,660 calls from January through August. This represents a remarkable 71 per cent increase in calls in just two years.

This demonstrates how beneficial the recent upgrades made to the Department of Public Safety Communications' (DPSC) resources has been. The goal of DPSC for the next financial year, Mr. Speaker, is to maintain and protect these investments, namely the Computer-Aided Dispatch System and the National CCTV programme. The Computer Aided Dispatch System, or CAD System, enhances emergency response by improving call handling and dispatch accuracy which reduces response times in critical, life-threatening events. The system works to reduce human errors and facilitate accurate data collection and analysis.

The National CCTV programme, which has been one of our greatest infrastructural strengths, has been improved this year in both software and hardware, and enabled the Department to roll out integrative services and specialised investigative tools. Also, as a result of the increasing demand and constant reliance on the Department of Public Safety Communications, a top priority is the maintenance of our cutting-edge communications infrastructure, which allows us to future-proof the public safety network, thereby increasing capabilities and resiliency. This includes the completion of a new communications tower in Northward, the acquisition of state-of-the-art radio systems and dispatch consoles, and necessary software upgrades. These improvements, Mr. Speaker, will enable us to continue responding swiftly and effectively during emergencies, thus saving lives and reducing property damage.

Mr. Speaker, you heard for yourself how these priorities align, and how the Ministry chooses to synergise its efficiencies so that we can continue to offer the Cayman Islands the best in public safety.

Home affairs, Mr. Speaker—

The Speaker: Madam Minister, would this be a convenient point to take the luncheon suspension?

Hon. Sabrina T. Turner: Yes, sir.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Members, we have a photographer outside to take a group photo of this current makeup of Parliament, so if we could hold our appetites for just a few more minutes, I think we can get that done in about five minutes. They're just outside, in the lobby, all set up to go. We will take the luncheon suspension now and we will resume at 2.15 p.m.

Proceedings suspended at 1.06 p.m.

Proceedings resumed at 2.42 p.m.

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Please be seated.

I want to apologise for the late resumption. There was a matter I needed to address with respect to one of our Members, and I needed to sort it out before we could resume. I don't want anyone to think that I had quickly gone back on my word about moving proceedings forward.

The Minister of Health & Wellness and Home Affairs resuming.

Hon. Sabrina T. Turner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'd like to take this opportunity to briefly thank the students of Cayman Academy who graced our hearts, and this Parliament, in song and a very powerful prayer. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for honouring that request. Much appreciated.

Just before the break, there were some sobering statistics shared on this Floor of the volume of calls received and handled by our 911 services and Mr. Speaker, this is proof of the power in the redirection and changing our strategic approach and showing that we care, we listen, and we understand the direction that we're going in and we are already seeing the fruits of that reallocation of funding in expanding our CCTVs. Obviously, it can be defended based on the stats that were shared here earlier.

Moving on to my other Ministry, Mr. Speaker, it is no different for my other Ministry, as we aim to deliver the best in healthcare. Similar to the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Health & Wellness is employing a data-driven approach to policymaking so we can truly meet the needs of our Caymanian people. I have been forthcoming, not only in this honourable Parliament but at every opportunity, about the data gaps that we have in our country, especially as it relates to health. Data-driven is the health version of intelligence-led in Home Affairs; as our work is guided by the Strategic Policy Statement, Mr. Speaker, I will endeavour to connect the dots between our work in health and wellness with the Government's Strategic Broad Outcomes.

Broad Outcome 1 Improving the Quality of Life for Caymanians and Residents

[This] underlies all the work that we do in health and wellness. For decades, Mr. Speaker, we have not only seen, but felt the damage which non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have wreaked on our families, our neighbourhoods and this very nation. This is why we launched the STEPS 2023 National Health Survey earlier this year, and why my team fought so hard to ensure that we had collected sufficient data to ensure that we had nationally representative numbers. At the end of this endeavour, we succeeded! My thanks again to all who participated in making this possible.

This data will be utilised to inform not only policy decision, but also public health programming. The STEPS results will provide insights into the groups within our population currently most impacted by non-

communicable diseases, allowing us to tailor health care interventions to meet their needs. It will also assist us in understanding the current barriers to health care, particularly preventative care, and how those barriers can be mitigated.

Mr. Speaker, although we have just started to scratch the surface of the rich data-set collected by the STEPS survey, certain key findings are already apparent.

Mr. Speaker, less than 30 per cent of our population has a healthy weight, and we know from the school health data that the problem of obesity in our society is arising often at an early age. Preliminary results indicate that the prevalence of obesity/being overweight remains high since the last STEPS survey of 2012. Although obesity carries many risks the most insidious is diabetes. The situation on our Islands is such, that few are the Caymanian families that will not be impacted directly by family members who suffer from diabetes— or, put another way, it is far more likely that a Caymanian family will have someone who suffers from diabetes than not.

Mr. Speaker, the STEPS data also tells us that significant numbers of people who are suffering from diabetes do not know it; and more still, whilst knowing they have diabetes, are receiving no treatment or care. Knowing “our” numbers will mean acting on them via planning and development of policies and programmes that meet the needs of our people.

In 2024, we can anticipate a full report that will provide further analysis of the data as it relates to diabetes and obesity; tobacco use; alcohol use; diet; physical activity; history of raised blood pressure, diabetes, raised cholesterol, cardiovascular disease, and better engagement with preventative healthcare and that is why we will see with the upcoming budget, Mr. Speaker that we envision and we expect to see more utilisation of our district clinics, because more funding is proposed to be directed in these areas. Therefore, optimising our district public health centres should be far more accessible.

Mr. Speaker, STEPS 2023 also offers us the possibility to calculate future projections of the healthcare burden that NCDs will create in years to come by using the prevalence of risk factors in the current population. This data will serve us for years to come, and will allow us to take meaningful action that will change lives.

Our efforts to become more data driven will improve our overall public health offerings, as it allows us to not only understand what is happening now, but also to project where our people's health needs will be in the future in light of their current health status. This means being able to proactively address gaps in knowledge, risk factors, and to become more targeted in our approach so that the correct messages and services are reaching the correct people. I will be the Minister to

champion that persons will not be hindered from accessing health care because of their social status or their net worth.

Mr. Speaker, data also plays a role in surveillance and outbreak response, and will provide us with an understanding of the threat of insertion of dengue to our Islands from the outbreaks in neighbouring countries and driving the scalable response to dengue control that it's proportionate and ecologically sensible. Beyond non-communicable disease and outbreak response, public health programmes focusing on prevention will also include work towards the elimination of cervical cancer by comprehensive use of effective human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccines, made available through a wide range of settings, to men and women, boys and girls. All of these things, Mr. Speaker, will have a direct impact on the quality of life of all who call Cayman home.

Mr. Speaker, in our efforts to proactively address health and wellness challenges, the Ministry of Health & Wellness has secured property for the creation of a wellness park in the Spotts area. The park will be developed in order to ensure that our community has an identified space for the enjoyment of calm, peace, and the natural beauty the Cayman Islands has to offer. The location being the old Mariner's Cove site, with views of the water, will provide that relaxation and rejuvenation which our beautiful natural environment provides. How blessed are we in these Cayman Islands to have such natural beauty all around us, why not embrace it and include it in wellness?

[Desk thumping]

Hon. Sabrina T. Turner: Mr. Speaker, as we aim to address our country's increasing mental health challenges, I would like to provide an update on the Poinciana Rehabilitation Centre, formerly known as the Long-Term Mental Health facility. Physical construction of the three main buildings and the nine cottages has been completed. The project management team has been focusing on getting the required inspections completed by the Building Control Unit. Only once completed and passed, and only then, the handover of the facility can occur.

Mr. Speaker, while we await the finalisation of the physical structure, our team at the Ministry has been working tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that the operational needs of the facility are being addressed simultaneously, so as to mitigate any further delay when the Certificate of Occupancy is issued. Our Ministry, and government overall, understands the importance of this facility to our Islands and indeed, are striving very hard to ensure that this is operational early in 2024.

Mr. Speaker, along with the development of key policies and procedures, as well as the ongoing recruitment of the facility's staffing, the team at Poinciana has been working to identify and customise a training

programme to be delivered specifically for Caymanians wishing to enter the field of mental health services. The Psychiatric Nursing Assistant Training Programme, being developed and finalised by the team, will be delivered free of cost to Caymanians ages 18 and up who meet the training requirements; furthermore, those who successfully complete the programme will be eligible for employment at the facility upon completing their certification.

Mr. Speaker, this is part of our commitment to provide our people with the tools that they need in order to meet the employment demands, and it is being offered right here at home. Furthermore, in an effort to build partnerships, the Poinciana team has been proactive in engaging with key stakeholders in mental health in our community. These stakeholders have included government, private sector, NPOs, patients and families themselves.

Looking more broadly at mental health services outside of Poinciana, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry is working to strengthen preventative and outpatient services in other ways. The Department of Counselling Services will be identifying, designing, and implementing new services based on the community's needs, which will be developed to complement existing services on offer. These services will include Parenting Programmes, therapeutic groups, and school-based workshops in Cayman Brac. Meanwhile, in Grand Cayman, the Department will introduce new therapeutic groups for complex mental health needs including trauma, and specific programming for parents deemed to be at risk.

The Department of Counselling Services will also be taking a more holistic approach to treatment and client care across all of its services, from earlier assessment and stabilisation of clients, through the provision of comprehensive mental health exams, to placing greater emphasis on nutrition planning and diet to support the recovery process. The Ministry is also a key supporter of Alex's Place, the youth mental health hub located at the HSA, and provides annual funding to the HSA through its outputs, to facilitate the operation of the programme.

Mr. Speaker, while the Ministry recognises and supports numerous efforts aimed at improving youth mental health services, it will also work to contribute to the execution of the Older Person's Policy through the introduction of wellness programmes throughout the community catering to the active and healthy lifestyles of older persons. Partnerships with internal and external stakeholders and community organisations will assist the Ministry in delivering on this goal.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to point out that my Ministry will also be working closely with the Alzheimer's and Dementia Association (ADACI) in the next year, to formulate a plan of action to provide support to those suffering from Alzheimer's and Dementia, their family members, and caregivers, in order to better address Alzheimer's and Dementia in our three Islands.

As such, I am pleased to announce that the Ministry will be providing continuous funding to ADACI, and I look forward to the support of this honourable Parliament when we get to the Finance Committee stage to make this a reality for the important work established by them.

[Desk thumping]

Hon. Sabrina T. Turner: Mr. Speaker, the Ministry has embarked on identifying a number of pieces of legislation requiring review and updating. One such is the Tobacco Act, 2008 and Tobacco Regulations (2017 Revision). Update is required to reflect the ongoing need to protect the public from the risks of tobacco products in line with us now being a full party to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. The Ministry looks forward to collaboration with the National Drug Council and other relevant stakeholders in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, the Chief Medical Officer has also alerted me to the development of non-tobacco nicotine products designed to circumvent the Tobacco Act in force in the Cayman Islands; the growing concern about the use of vaping products that have particular appeal for children, and the waste generated by disposable vaping products. We are diligently working to ensure that this is addressed for the sake of our youth and our environment.

Mr. Speaker, the Health Practice Act and its corresponding Regulations are also being reviewed and updated to reflect a number of changes in our health services landscape. The Ministry has received advice from the Health Practice Commission and is considering the issues raised with a view to bringing a proposed Bill to Parliament in the next budget cycle.

Mr. Speaker, on a related matter, the Health Practice Council has recently adopted a new set of standards for permitting clinical trials to take place in the Cayman Islands. These were long overdue. The granting of permission to undertake clinical trials is not trivial given that, by definition, the effectiveness and safety of a medicine or procedure that is the subject of such a trial does not have well-established safety and/or outcome data, as having those would render a trial unnecessary. These standards place patient safety as their foremost consideration.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry is also in the process of revamping Public Health on a national level. As I have stated previously in this honourable Parliament, this is critical if we are to move forward and future-proof our Islands. Data on a national level is critical to effect positive outcomes. I am pleased that a Strategic Outline Case has been developed with the assistance of the Strategic Reforms Unit under the Office of the Deputy Governor which will be taken to Cabinet shortly for approval, for the Ministry to progress the work on separating Public Health from its current construct.

As such, Mr. Speaker, this requires an overhaul of the current Public Health Act (2021 Revision). The Ministry has been working diligently to ensure that

the amendments provide the right framework for a data-driven approach to Public Health. Regulations will ensure that the Cayman Islands can effectively regulate and manage all public health and environmental health functions, inclusive of the control of infectious diseases, food safety, environmental health, littering, solid waste management and recycling.

Mr. Speaker, another piece of legislation that will be critical to the development of an ever more self-sufficient health care system in the Cayman Islands is the Human Tissue Transplant Act. The Ministry conducted research on the structure and functions of various advisory bodies and regulating bodies for human transplantation to ensure that we have a national framework for the standards of the facilities that will be undergoing transplantation in the Cayman Islands.

Mr. Speaker, we have also just recently closed public consultation on the proposed new Pharmacy Act. We must say, *thank God for that*. This Bill is designed to replace legislation that is now some 40-years old and no longer fit-for-purpose. The Ministry is currently in the process of drafting a report to ensure that the public feedback has been captured, following a 60-day public and professional consultation period. I want to thank those who took the time to participate in the public consultation, Mr. Speaker, as their feedback will be used to assist with the review of the final draft Bill, where applicable.

Mr. Speaker, the highlights of the Bill are as follows:

- Provides that a licence from the Pharmacy Council will be required for importation, manufacture, dispensing and wholesale of medicines.
- Provides a mechanism for dealing with non-approved medicines for exceptional and emergency use authorisation and, the importation of an approved medicine for self-administration.
- Provides that a pharmacy medicine can only be supplied by, or under, the supervision of a pharmacist.
- Provides that all medicines must include patient information in English.
- Provides that as well as medical doctors, dentists, and veterinary surgeons, other registered practitioner regulations can be made to allow for the development of an extended scope of practice of suitably trained clinical professionals who currently do not have prescribing rights; such as pharmacists and advanced practice nurses (also referred to as nurse practitioners).
- Provides that pharmacists may dispense an emergency supply of essential prescription-only medicine without a prescription.
- Provides for the appointment of an inspector(s) who may enter, inspect and search, and take samples of medicines and seize anything that

they believe may be connected with the commission or intended commission of an offence under the Act.

Quality of human life, Mr. Speaker, is significantly impacted and determined by the quality of the natural environment within which we all live. It is, therefore, understandable why climate change resilience and sustainable development are issues as relevant to health as they are to the economy or disaster management.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Health and Wellness will be contributing to climate change resilience and sustainable development in a number of ways.

Internally, the Ministry and its Departments will ensure that where possible, it will adopt sustainable solutions to reduce its carbon footprint.

MRCU will also explore the introduction of electric fogging machines to reduce its carbon emission when it undertakes its much-needed mosquito control operations and undertake more research methods to improve mosquito control.

Mr. Speaker, it should also be noted at this point that the Ministry will seek to procure a new aircraft for MRCU which will bolster and ensure available resources for the effectiveness of mosquito control including east of the tamarind tree in Cayman Brac.

[Laughter]

[Desk thumping]

Hon. Sabrina T. Turner: As we all know, effective mosquito control is very important to our quality of life and is directly related to Public Health's ability to control diseases that can be spread by mosquitoes, such as dengue fever.

Mr. Speaker, the Department of Environmental Health will also be working to expand national recycling efforts by making it more accessible to residents. Plans include, but are not limited to, the implementation of curb side recycling in residential communities, expanding the collection of recyclable goods beyond currently established depots, and enhancing outreach programmes to improve the quantity and quality of recyclable materials collected by the Department.

Broad Outcome 2 Enhance Competitiveness while Meeting International Standards

Within the Ministry of Health & Wellness, our specific outcome is ensuring an equitable, sustainable and successful healthcare system.

A key priority therefore for the Ministry, will be the development of Standards of Practice for the Cayman Islands, which will include but not limited to:

- Exploring the development of a Resuscitation Council and the development of an integrated Acute Coronary Syndrome Service;

- Standards for clinical trials;
- Human tissue transplant;
- Development of acute chest pain access and resus standardisation;
- Professional standards clinical area reviews; and
- Scope and domains of practice. For example, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and prescribing standards.

Mr. Speaker, the Department of Health Regulatory Services will also work with relevant stakeholders in an effort to encourage all major healthcare providers to seek accreditation from appropriate external quality assurance bodies. Accreditation from recognised international bodies would elevate the standard of care for local hospitals and other large health care services facilities by ensuring adherence to international best practices in the delivery of healthcare services in our Islands. This would create an additional system of checks and balances as accreditation is given and retained by consistently adhering to these best practices.

The Ministry notes the achievement recently by the HSA on the Joint Commission International (JCI) accreditation. A notable achievement indeed for our government hospital and our country must be proud.

Mr. Speaker, the elevation of service delivery will promote more preventative approaches to health care, the standardisation of processes, and reduce the number of negative patient outcomes, among other things, all of which will work to reduce the cost of health care to the patient, insurance providers, and the Government.

Additionally Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will review the provision of healthcare services to indigents and other groups in an effort to reduce the significant costs being expended on healthcare. While we all agree that there must be access, this must be sustainable and efficient in order to ensure continuity. Mr. Speaker, these actions demonstrate the transformative vigour that drives the Ministry of Health & Wellness, and I truly believe that this entire Government shares that same vigour. This has led us to begin thinking deeply of what a generation of Caymanian healthcare workers will look like, which leads us to future proof to increase resiliency.

Broad Outcome 3 Future Proof to Increase Resiliency

The Ministry will be exploring partnerships with the University College of the Cayman Islands and the Ministry of Education to have accredited laboratories that can be used to train and qualify aspiring public health professionals. If this partnership comes to fruition, we can extend this offering to students from other UK Overseas Territories to foster positive social and educational exchange.

Mr. Speaker, I know first-hand how beneficial this would be for young Caymanians because we currently have one at the helm of the Cayman Islands Molecular Biology Lab, which is funded by my Ministry. The training and development opportunities for Caymanian scientists have increased tremendously, which assures that we can retain our home-grown talent here on our shores. [Thus], I am going to continue to invite my Caymanians overseas to come home and give of their talents, and they must and will be embraced in our healthcare industry.

[Desk thumping]

Hon. Sabrina T. Turner: The time has come for the culture to change where we feel as though we are not appreciated in our own home but are accepted by other jurisdictions. That needs to stop today.

We [will] all recall how vital it was for us here in Cayman during the COVID pandemic to be able to perform our own testing locally. Key services that can be provided by the Molecular Biology Laboratory are:

- Public health surveillance, outbreak analysis and molecular diagnostics for, amongst other diseases: Influenza, COVID-19, HIV, Chickenpox, Herpes viruses, Tuberculosis, a wide range of respiratory pathogens, gastrointestinal and food-borne illness.

Mr. Speaker, just wrap your head around that. Our very own Molecular Lab is capable of carrying out these functions.

- The Molecular Biology Lab can now support veterinary investigations into potential cases of Avian Influenza; and
- Rapid turnaround diagnostics are successfully helping us to combat the risk from introduction of dengue fever to the Islands, which is now endemic and giving rise to very serious concerns in a number of Caribbean Islands, and helping us to continue to give assurance that we are free from endemic Zika and chikungunya [viruses]; additionally
- We continue to play our part in international SARS-CoV-2 genomic sequencing surveillance and reporting.

Mr. Speaker, we are not only elevating the status of the Cayman Islands' healthcare offerings for our own population, but also to become a regional hub of trusted information. Our nation is small Mr. Speaker, but we are mighty. We have much to offer the world in so many ways, so why not also in health?

Mr. Speaker, internally, the Ministry leads by example as we are building for the future at the national level. More focus this past year has been on attracting suitable human resources to be able to have the capacity to carry out the many priorities of the Ministry. This

is imperative for future success. At my last budget address I spoke about the need for a Chief Nursing Officer and an Epidemiologist to enhance our leadership at the national level. I am pleased that we have retained the National Epidemiologist and have been informed that the post of Chief Nursing Officer is filled and will be announced shortly.

Future proofing is also directly linked to wellness and the more specific outcome of providing solutions to improve the well-being of our people so they can achieve their full potential.

The Ministry will contribute to this outcome via a comprehensive review of the National Strategic Health Policy. This review will take a data-driven approach to identifying national health needs and will create a roadmap for how to meet said needs, taking into consideration human resources and talent development and recruitment aimed at Caymanians at all levels.

Broad Outcome 4 Modernise Government to Improve Public Sector Performance

I appreciate that for some, the connection between this outcome and the Ministry of Health & Wellness may not be very clear, but given the significant work that the Ministry of Health & Wellness will be undertaking in this area it is important that I connect the dots.

Mr. Speaker, our focus will be on **“strengthening good governance for more effective government”**, through the revision and amendments of some of the key Acts, Regulations and Policies, some of which I have mentioned earlier. These are:

1. Health Practice Act and Regulations, which will clarify a number of key issues around standards and registration;
2. Pharmacy Act and Regulations, which will help to set out legislative changes to allow a wider range of help for professionals to offer medicines and direct medical services, as outlined previously;
3. Health Insurance Act and Regulations, which will address the evaluation of the current health insurance systems to see if they deliver fair and equitable access, especially to those in most need.

Mr. Speaker, we are aware of the growing population of elderly Caymanians and the issues around insurance coverage. Work will be undertaken with relevant stakeholders to review and improve this area;

4. Public Health Act and Environmental Health Act: The Ministry will expedite the proposals to develop current public health legislation giving separate identity to the Public Health and Environmental Health Act and introducing a secure framework for the regulation of waste.

Mr. Speaker, specific policies to be reviewed and developed in order to prioritise this broad outcome also include:

- The development and implementation of Health and Safety Standards, particularly as it relates to hazardous materials (safeguarding of disposal and employee safety). This work will be carried out in collaboration with Hazard Management Cayman Islands (the foundational work already underway);
- The execution of a policy review to propose a method of controlling nuisance insects and disease vectors to ensure control of chikungunya, dengue and zika, accounting for the minimisation of environmental/ecosystem impacts; and
- Policy review and proposal in relation to Cemetery Guidelines.

The Department of Health Regulatory Services will continue to develop an automated system for handling registrations and other applications from healthcare providers as the Ministry seeks to employ more technological enhancements in the delivery of services offered through the department thereby improving the customer experience. This will reduce wait times and enhance the Department's capabilities to ensure robust due diligence in carrying out its remit.

Broad Outcome 5 Protect and Promote Caymanian Culture, Heritage and Identity

Mr. Speaker, the promotion of our culture and heritage is not something that is limited only to cultural events or the safeguarding of heritage sites, though these are obviously very important and necessary.

Ensuring that Caymanian clinical and allied experts are engaged to contribute their invaluable experiences with our youth is one way in which we can provide opportunity for Caymanian youth to see themselves as Caymanian doctors, nurses and other professionals in the health field, which will help them to more readily identify these as career options. If we create the mechanism for **"improving education to promote lifelong learning..."**, we then create a positive cycle of supply and demand. This will help to protect and promote Caymanian identity.

Mr. Speaker, similarly, the promotion of culture, heritage and identity also comes from creating additional avenues where cultural exchange to bridge generations can happen. This is how the Ministry of Health & Wellness envisions that our support to the Older Person's Policy via community-based wellness programmes will function, engaging our elderly Caymanians to engage with youth to share their knowledge and experiences.

This initiative will be delivered in conjunction with non-governmental organisation (NGO) partners,

and will work to facilitate access to services as well as raise public awareness within the community with regard to aging and disabilities in the preservation of our culture.

Mr. Speaker, as I conclude, I wish to reiterate my commitment to the people of these Cayman Islands with respect to healthcare. My vision and long-term goals remain steadfast. These remain:

- *"Ensuring a sustainable and successful healthcare system for our Islands in the provision of optimal health and wellbeing for our people, while reducing health inequalities;*
- *Enhancing the standards of healthcare services and recognising healthcare as a basic human right through the reform of the current healthcare system and provision of centralised health insurance coverage; and*
- *A more preventative care-focused approach to improve overall wellness leading to better physical and mental health outcomes, allowing our people to thrive."*

Mr. Speaker, as I close, I would like to remind my colleagues that what I have outlined here today is not the sum of our intentions to improve our country's public health and safety. I trust that, as we debate over the coming days, we will make more decisions in the people's present and future interests as it relates to all of our areas of responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, my teams at the Ministry of Health and Wellness and the Ministry of Home Affairs and I, remain committed to doing our part in achieving all the aforementioned broad outcomes as set out by the Government.

Mr. Speaker, we are often reminded that charity begins at home, so too does unity. Without unity we cannot achieve our best. I have no doubt that each one of us want to do right by our people and it is because of this that I have purposed to be united in doing just that. I have tried my best today, to incorporate this into the approach which I have presented my address. Presenting a united commitment from the perspective of my two Ministries which are people-centred and moving forward for the betterment of our country.

Mr. Speaker, we are united in purpose to deliver the best services to our people at the best value, to keep our goals people-centred so that we are meeting the needs of our people, and to continue on a forward-thinking approach to keep moving ahead, despite the challenges.

I close by thanking my Ministry teams for their dedication, hard work and unwavering support, and indeed to the people of Prospect and these beautiful Cayman Islands for the opportunity which has been afforded me to stand here today as your Minister of Health & Wellness and Home Affairs.

With this, please allow me to express publicly, *Season's Greetings!* During this joyous time of year, let us come together to celebrate the spirit of goodwill,

unity and shared humanity. May the warmth of the season envelop you, and your loved ones enjoy peace and love.

In a world that can sometimes feel so divided, let us focus on what unites us: our shared hopes, dreams and the simple joys that make life so special. May this holiday season remind us of the importance of compassion, understanding, and reaching out to those around us.

As we gather with family and friends, let us appreciate the diversity that enriches our lives and strengthens the fabric of our communities.

In the spirit of putting people first, may we extend kindness to one another and find common ground that fosters connections and builds bridges.

Wishing you all a warm, wonderful holiday season filled with laughter, love and moments of togetherness.

Thank you for your attention, and may God continue to bless our beloved Cayman Islands.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Desk thumping]

The Speaker: Thank you, Minister.
The Member for West Bay West.

[Pause]

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush, Elected Member for West Bay West: Mr. Speaker, I will give the Minister of Tourism the opportunity at this point.

The Speaker: Very well.

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: Of course, I will be speaking.

[Laughter]

The Speaker: You've used up two minutes of your time.

The Minister of Tourism and Ports.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: Mr. Speaker, I want to first start by thanking the honourable Father of the House for giving way. I know that he rose before me, but hopefully my contributions will give way for him to expand.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to make my contributions to the Appropriation Bill for the Financial Years 2024 and 2025; and I extend my congratulations to Her Excellency the Governor, Mrs. Jane Owen on her maiden Throne Speech in this honourable House on Friday. I also want to congratulate my Premier on her contributions entitled: "Nurturing Our Future: A United Sustainable Path to Recovery, Hope and Prosperity".

Mr. Speaker, I beg your indulgence one more time. I want to take this opportunity to wish a special Happy Birthday to Miss Vernice Ebanks-Myles, whom I know you are familiar with, who turns 81 years old today or, as she would say, 18 all over again. May God bless her and keep her, and may her life be extended to see many, many, more to come.

It is my pleasure and privilege as Minister for Tourism and Ports, Mr. Speaker, to deliver my second Budget Address in this honourable Parliament, under the newly formed United People's Movement Administration. I emphasise, Mr. Speaker, that the change in leadership was not a victory of politicians, but rather of the people—the people who elected us and whom we are proud to serve. As the name United People's Movement suggests, I stand here in unity with my Government colleagues, and I believe I speak for us all in saying that we are committed to working together effectively, and delivering on our obligations and responsibilities as representatives and policy makers for the Cayman Islands, and for the best interests of our people.

Mr. Speaker, for those who might interpret those as fancy words, let me break them down, because what I mean by them is that the United People's Movement is committed to making our beloved Islands, the best.

- The best place to live;
- The best place to bring up children;
- The best place to lead a wholesome and fulfilling life; and
- The best place for our seniors to retire and live with dignity.

Consequently, I am happy to reassure the good people of this country, that their government has wasted no time in getting down to business and doing the people's work. We have hit the ground running and are focusing on delivering as many of the things our people are asking for, as quickly as we can.

In some instances, that means changing perspectives and doing things differently. In this case I'm talking, particularly, about tourism because the truth is, Mr. Speaker, [that] over the last two years, the Cayman Islands have done an excellent job, whether intentionally or not, on sending a clear message locally and internationally that the Government's number one focus above all else was the environment; and if we are being very candid, Mr. Speaker, this was increasingly being interpreted as the government being anti-development and anti-growth.

The impact of that, Mr. Speaker, was that we started to see a gradual decline in the number of projects and types of proposals coming forward for consideration, and I believe the assumption was either that they wouldn't be considered under that administration or that they would have to go through so many hoops and red tape to satisfy the environmental requirements, that it just wasn't worth it.

Now, don't get me wrong, Mr. Speaker, there is absolutely nothing wrong with caring for the environment. In fact, I too, subscribe to the view that we have a duty and a responsibility to safeguard our environment both now, and for the future; but the problem I had, Mr. Speaker, was when the extreme environmentalist viewpoints had a trickle-down effect on the building of roads or other infrastructure, which our people need to improve the quality of their lives.

Mr. Speaker, it didn't just stop there. It also started to have an effect on tourism. As a result, the perception was that tourism was no longer a priority for the Government. I found it very disheartening to find that more and more people had the impression that tourism had been placed on the back burner because it went against the principles of what the former administration held in high regard, which is being super protective of the environment. As I said, there's nothing wrong with caring for the environment, nothing at all, but it has to be considered as a part of a balanced approach to sustainable growth and development, rather than being completely at one end of the spectrum or the other.

What is needed, is the willingness to find the middle ground, Mr. Speaker, and recalibrate and explore the possibilities of arriving at a win-win scenario where the needs of the environment and the needs of the tourism industry can both be satisfied for mutual benefit. For example, Mr. Speaker, the whole question about beach replenishment is a prime example of how government and industry can work together to come up with mutually beneficial solutions to this environmental issue that gravely impacts our tourism product and potentially our revenues from the industry. I am committed to working alongside the new Minister of Sustainability to find a win-win solution that will bring long-term benefits to all.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I say this because while tourism might be the second pillar to our economy in terms of revenue, I would argue all day long and I've heard you say this before, Mr. Speaker, as the former Premier of this country, that it is our most important industry because it's the one that many more Caymanians are involved in.

Yes, strictly from an economic standpoint Financial Services contributes more money to our economy, but when a hotel is built, it is an asset that is here to stay, and brings more and more tangible opportunities for Caymanians—opportunities to work, to provide services to tourists, to be involved and earn a living on many different levels. Once a hotel property is established here, the hoteliers have a vested interest in ensuring Cayman's success. They use their big international brand names and their extensive networks to market this destination, and guests who are loyal to those brands, travel here to experience them in the Cayman context.

Mr. Speaker, I believe in growth and sustainability. When managed correctly, it can be a path to prosperity, but it has to be done in the right way; in a way that is beneficial to Cayman and Caymanians; and so, the message I want to send to the business community is that this administration understands our economy. We understand the benefits that come with carefully-chosen developments and managed growth. This is a Government that is open to listening to ideas and proposals that will bring benefit to Cayman and will prioritise the empowerment of our Caymanian people.

Now, Mr. Speaker, that doesn't mean that we're going to give away the shop, the house, the country and everything in between. What it means is that we recognise that sustainable growth will bring benefit to the Caymanian people through the building of roads and hotels and other infrastructure projects. Sustainable growth is often interpreted as being a bad thing, Mr. Speaker, but that doesn't have to be the case.

Yes, we have problems with sudden growth which has caused things like traffic, housing and immigration— but those things can be fixed, Mr. Speaker. What we shouldn't do, is pull up the hand brake, spin wheels, and face into the opposite direction; what we cannot do, is come to a screeching halt in our economy. We have to keep moving forward, Mr. Speaker. Adjusting and rebalancing as we go or, as former Premier Bush would say, "*You have to bob and weave.*"

Hence, Mr. Speaker, as the Minister of Tourism, I am keen to use the tourism industry and see it grow and see the benefits from tourism being spread all over the island, from the tip of West Bay to the tip of Spot Bay Bluff. I would love to see a new attraction or boutique hotel in the Eastern districts that is in keeping with the laid-back approach and serenity of that area. It would bring back jobs and opportunities for the people who live in those districts, reduce commute and decrease their reliance on having to be on Seven Mile Beach in order to make a living.

That is one reason that the East-West Arterial is so important. Not only will it relieve traffic, but it will add a level of convenience to our locals and visitors alike, reducing the time that it takes to get from the airport to their accommodations in Bodden Town, Kaibo, Rum Point, East End, and North Side. That would be a good thing, Mr. Speaker, because no one wants to be on a flight for three hours, land in Cayman and then have to spend another hour to get to their hotel.

Mr. Speaker, under this UPM Administration, you will see a change in the approach regarding how tourism is managed moving forward. I was already open to trying new things Mr. Speaker, like boldly introducing routes into new destinations that had never been tried before, and I intend to be even more assertive in my approach to finding new opportunities to grow tourism— and you know why, Mr. Speaker? Because nothing ventured, nothing gained. If we do not try we cannot succeed, and failure is simply not an option under the UPM Administration.

I want the private sector to recognise that it's time to reinvest in the tourism sector. I want the business owners to regain their confidence in the industry, and be willing to expand and grow their operations and their products and services. I will speak more on this throughout my contributions, as I report on some of the work undertaken by the Ministry of Tourism and Ports and its statutory authorities over the past financial year.

Arrivals Statistics 2023

Mr. Speaker, I want to begin with my report on Tourism, as it is the industry that touches particularly every sector in our society, often with a multiplier effect that ripples throughout our entire economy. It is for that reason that I am pleased to advise this honourable House that the Cayman Islands tourism industry has not just performed extremely well in 2023, but has exceeded all projections.

Over the first nine months of this year stay over and cruise arrivals to the Cayman Islands registered at an impressive 105 per cent increase in total visitation compared to the same period last year. Looking at our most current arrival figures between January and October of this year, our Islands welcomed 343,660 stay-over visitors and 993,919 cruise visitors—and I just got updated numbers a minute ago which I'll give to the House shortly; but imagine, those are the numbers just in the first ten months of this year. This equates to 83.8 per cent of the 2019 visitation numbers, and comfortably exceeds the target I had set for 70 per cent of the 2019 visitor arrivals.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, the 70 per cent target in respect to the revenues had been achieved by September, which is a testament of the hard work and expertise of the management and staff in the Ministry of Tourism and Ports and its subsidiaries, and the collective partnership that exists between the government and the private sector. As a reminder for the benefit of the listening public, 2019 is used as a benchmark for comparison because it was the last full year of travel prior to the pandemic, Mr. Speaker; it was also our tourism industry's best year on record, for which much credit must be given to the former Minister.

What that means, Mr. Speaker, is that we are comparing our post-pandemic results to the highest benchmark possible. I particularly commend my Chief-Officer, Mr. Stran Bodden and the Director for Tourism, Mrs. Rosa Harris, and their teams both locally and overseas, for their stellar work in contributing to these outcomes, as well as the members of our private sector organisations who work tirelessly to promote and showcase the Cayman Islands as a leading luxury vacation destination in the Caribbean.

I would also like to beg your indulgence, Mr. Speaker, to allow me to take this opportunity to congratulate Director Rosa Harris on receiving the 2023 Caribbean Media Exchange Leadership Award, which

honours individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to the tourism and hospitality industry within the Caribbean and beyond. Director Harris is the first Caymanian to receive this award.

[Desk thumping]

Tourism and Transport for 2023

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: While the Cayman Islands' tourism performance is certainly an accomplishment to be proud of, the more important question to address is how will these visitor arrivals translate to improving the lives of Caymanians? The simple answer is this, Mr. Speaker, the tourism industry is considered as the second pillar to our economy in purely economic terms, but its impact resonates throughout our communities touching the lives of persons who work in and for the industry as well as those who don't—, and that reality came to light during the pandemic more than ever.

The money visitors spend in our Islands circulates within our economy, providing thousands of workers, not just tourism workers, Mr. Speaker, with an income to provide for themselves and their families. It helps businesses operate and keep their doors open, and provides jobs in all kinds of supporting service sectors from dry cleaning to garden maintenance, to car rentals and everything in between. Revenue collected from tourism taxes and fees is used by government to provide benefits and services for our people like free education and school lunches for our children; new roads; garbage collection; healthcare and social support to those in need.

This is why, Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to advise the country that the \$25 million in revenue that had been projected for the full year of 2023 was in fact exceeded within the first six months, so instead of collecting \$25 million between January and December, we had already collected up to \$28.8 million by June. By October, revenue earned from tourism taxes and fees had risen to \$31.5 million, Mr. Speaker, which is just \$5 million shy of the revenue collected in the record-breaking year of 2019. Mr. Speaker, I am optimistic, that when all the revenue for 2023 has been collected, we would have met or *exceeded* that historical \$36.5 [million] benchmark that was reached in 2019.

This is why it's so important that we go beyond the arrival stats and look at the bigger picture of how to the tourism industry is actually performing; because as I mentioned earlier, Mr. Speaker, the revenue earned from tourism is ploughed back into the public purse to provide the benefits and services our people need.

Arrivals and Revenue Projections for 2024

Throughout this year, and particularly through the high season for travel, feedback from industry partners confirms that hotel occupancy is high and tourists

are spending more, and staying longer in our jurisdiction. The average daily rate (ADR) of hotel rooms increased by 30.2 per cent between January and September 2023, compared to the same period in 2022, and the average time a tourist stays on Island has returned to the high number of six nights, as it was in 2019, prior to the onset of the pandemic.

In terms of airline seat capacity, as seasonal routes come online from the United States, and West Jet and Air Canada increase their frequency from Toronto, we will see an increase in the number of seats from North America. This is in addition to the twice-weekly service to Los Angeles now being offered by our national flag carrier Cayman Airways (CAL) and the weekly service to Barbados, giving our Islands a direct connection into the Eastern Caribbean region.

I should note here, Mr. Speaker that the new CAL services are another example of the change in approach of how tourism is being managed going forward. Even though Barbados is a competitor on one hand, it is still important to explore how we can partner with them to attract more visitation from the Caribbean region to our shores. As one of my fellow regional tourism Ministers puts it, our resources should be used to “co”-pete, not compete, because there is a larger market of tourism visitors in the world for us to share.

Room stock

Mr. Speaker, turning our attention now to room stock. Three hundred and thirteen more rooms were added to the tourism accommodation rental pool during this year raising the total from 7,331 in December 2022, to 7,644 rooms in December 2023. Our tourism accommodation currently comprises 10,410 beds, with apartments and condos accounting to 49 per cent of available tourism rentals, followed by hotels with 34 per cent of the market, and guest houses with 18 per cent.

As we continue to market our Islands and encourage more tourists to visit our shores, more rooms will naturally be required to accommodate the increase in visitor arrivals. I am therefore looking forward to the addition of at least seven new hotel properties which are slated to come onto the market over the next three years. These projects are at various stages of development. Mr. Speaker, with the first — Hotel Indigo — due to be delivered in Q1 of 2024, followed by One GT later in the year.

Together, these seven projects will contribute over 1,200 additional rooms to the tourism accommodation pool and they represent a huge investment of capital into our Islands that will continue delivering benefits for years to come. For example, Mr. Speaker, the Department of Tourism projects a 16.53 per cent increase in revenues to government over the next two years as a result. Revenues that government can use to provide scholarships, expand our infrastructure and help our people.

In the home share sector, commonly known as Airbnb or VRBO (Vacation Rentals by Owner) which I know many Caymanians are involved with— and I was quite surprised by the Leader of the Opposition saying that was the only place for the increase, but he should be happy about that, Mr. Speaker, because it is where the money goes directly into the hands of our people rather than being trickled through a hotel investment. Mr. Speaker, that area has increased by 6.4 per cent in occupancy which was recorded during the first three quarters of this year. Now, although the average daily rates declined slightly by 1.5 per cent, the revenue per listing still has increased by 17.5 per cent compared to the same period last year.

2024 Visitation Forecast

Mr. Speaker, having heard the overview of our tourism industry's recovery, and the performance for 2023, for the year 2024 I'm pleased to advise that I've set a new target of 95 per cent of the 2019 stayover visitor arrivals, and \$40 million in revenue for tourism accommodation taxes, which exceeds the total revenue collected by the record-breaking year in 2019. Mr. Speaker, I'm confident in my team that we will make that mark.

Cruise Sector

Turning our attention now to the cruise sector, Mr. Speaker. As I stated earlier, during the first ten months of the year 993,919 cruise passengers visited the Cayman Islands (just shy of one million), which represents 68.8 per cent of 2019's arrivals. I anticipate, that when the passenger numbers for November and December become available and are added, cruise passenger arrivals will be close to, or just surpass, the 70 per cent target which was set at the beginning of this year.

Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned to you earlier, we just got the news as to those projections, and I want to share the actual November numbers because November has now passed. In the month of November, we added another 127,283 to that total of 993,919 cruise passengers, and for December's projection we expect 179,664, so our patrons, our business people, our vendors, will have a busy December making good money for themselves and their families, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, clearly our cruise tourism arrivals are not as promising as our stayover visitation and with cruise lines still being unwilling to tender large ships, the outlook over the long term is not likely to improve as much as stayover. I've spoken before on the realities that our cruise sector faces— and God forbid I say the word piers, but the truth is we can only avoid the elephant in the room for so long. At some point, we have to address the fact that if we continue in the cruise business, we either have to be willing to accept the contin-

ual decline in passenger numbers over time, or reconsider our options with respect to having a cruise pier. Okay, there you go. I said it. I said cruise piers.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: Now the world hasn't fallen apart yet.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: Mr. Speaker, you among all people would be well aware of the level of public sensitivity concerning the subject matter— and I am in no way attempting to go contrary to the people's opinion; but my point is, although a petition was delivered to the Government to trigger a referendum on this subject, the referendum didn't take place.

In hindsight, Mr. Speaker, it might have been a good thing, because at the time, people felt absolutely assured that the Cayman Islands was the jewel of the Caribbean cruise sector and ships had no choice but to stop here.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: Well, in the years since the question of piers was last discussed, we have seen that the cruise lines *don't* have to stop here. Itineraries have been changed to no longer include George Town, which is what we were told to expect.

Mr. Speaker, I don't for one second believe that the cruise lines are being malicious in any way; they want to make money just like we do, but the fact is that back then, the discussions were focused on the Oasis-class ships, and now those are transitioning to even larger Icon-class ships. Thus, Mr. Speaker, if they are unwilling to tender the Oasis-class ships, does anyone really believe that they will tender the Icon-class ships? I sincerely doubt it, Mr. Speaker.

Now to be clear, I am not here to advocate for the cruise lines. I'm merely calling it as I see it, in my capacity as the Minister of Tourism with responsibility for this sector so, now that we see our cruise sector dwindling, I think it would be wise for us to hold a referendum in the next election Mr. Speaker, so that the people can settle the question once and for all of whether the Cayman Islands should have piers to remain as a viable cruise destination, because if we don't make a decision, I think my points have highlighted the reality.

Maybe it does not necessarily have to be in George Town where there might be a risk to Seven Mile Beach. Maybe it can be considered somewhere else? Either way—

[Inaudible interjection]

[Laughter]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: Either way, Mr. Speaker, the representatives of the people need a clear direction, because having piers or not having piers, both options have their pros and cons, and the people need to decide.

We as a country have to recognise that if we do not have piers our cruise tourism product will continue to decline. That is a simple fact. If the people say they still do not want it, that's all well and good. I believe in letting the people guide us in our decisions on their behalf, but we need to know how they feel about this sensitive area.

As I have stated many times since becoming Minister for Tourism, I am committed to the success of the Cayman Islands cruise sector. I am aware of the role that cruise tourism plays in the livelihoods of our Caymanian people working in tourism and I am sensitive to the fact that there is a significantly high percentage of Caymanian entrepreneurs providing services and products to the cruise sector; particularly in the public transport services and water sports sectors. In fact, in the most recent Tourism Business Insights Survey conducted by the Department of Tourism, 68 per cent of respondents confirmed that the cruise industry provides 50 per cent of their earned income for their businesses.

The reality is, across the Caribbean, other cruise destinations are gaining market share and it is their economies and people who are benefitting from increased passenger volumes, while we continue to see a deficit here in Cayman. Again, Mr. Speaker, just stating the facts. I am raising this again because I do not want myself, my Ministry or even this Administration to be criticised—which, I really got a taste of it this morning—for not being able to deliver the passenger volumes expected without the resources to do so.

You heard earlier what the Leader of Opposition said, *we cannot get back to 2019 numbers*. They say it because they are doing a good job as Opposition, they know that, because they know the reality just as much as I do. Hence, the reason why I had to put it back up for discussion. Not because I want the criticism, because I can promise you tomorrow there will be a headline, 'The Minister of Tourism opens up the pier talk again'.

I am raising this again because I do not want myself or this Administration to be criticised without the necessary resources to bring the numbers back to where they were in the record breaking year of 2019. Besides, maybe the people do not want those record breaking numbers. I will expand on that a little bit further as to why maybe they do not want it.

In the meantime, we haven't given up. We are doing all that we can to stimulate the cruise sector, and the reality here is, there is no question that our Islands would benefit from a more well-rounded and sustainable tourism portfolio.

As part of our cruise recovery strategy, the Ministry and the Department of Tourism (DOT) have

sought to leverage opportunities to directly engage with cruise industry decision-makers to try to influence and increase cruise visitation to our destination. Mr. Speaker, I think it has worked, because the truth is, the numbers that we got for this year were expected to be less. It was a lot of begging, begging to work with us because of our good relationship over the many decades that the CEOs added more calls, because the business model is not helping them. That is why December we will see about 170,000 people; because of begging.

In June of this year the Cayman Islands hosted senior Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association (FCCA) executives from all of the major cruise lines for the annual FCCA Platinum Associate Member Advisory Council (PAMAC) Conference. This was attended by 150 members of the PAMAC. Candid discussions once again identified that if we want to attract luxury yachts with higher paying passengers, we *must* enhance our cruise product, and offer a wider variety of activities and products that those types of visitors would be willing to pay a premium for.

Additionally, data is increasingly showing that the millennials' travel market (travellers ages 27-40), tend to prefer cultural experiences over traditional beach vacations. Millennials are a significant demographic both for stay over and cruise passengers, and this shift in preferences presents an opportunity for the Cayman Islands to diversify its tourism products and provide more culturally immersive experiences.

Visitor Experience Grant

To this end Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to announce that funding has been secured within this budget to establish a programme specifically for small businesses and entrepreneurs within the tourism sector.

Effective 2024, the Visitor Experience Development Grant (VEDG) will be in place to help micro and small businesses to set up shop all across the country, so that we can have more, authentic tourism products and services available outside of our traditional tourism hotspots.

The Visitor Experience Grant is designed to fulfil several specific needs:

1. It will improve the visitor experience, by providing more exposure to Caymanian arts and crafts, and cottage industries;
2. It will provide start-ups and entrepreneurs with up to \$50,000 in funding they vitally need but often cannot access via the banks;
3. It will give Caymanian cottage industries and artisans the support they need to expedite their growth.

This is just one example of the type of projects and programmes that my Ministry looks forward to making

available to the smaller 'mom-and-pop' type businesses to help them in ways that are meaningful to their lives. I am a firm believer that keeping our people at the forefront of the Government's policies and initiatives will pay dividends well into the future. In this instance it will enhance the quality and diversity of our tourism offerings; allowing our destination to attract more visitors; generate more income and create more jobs.

Tourism Waterfront Experience

Moving now to the tourism waterfront development. In my last budget address I announced that the Government had purchased a waterfront property situated in a prime location in George Town, to develop a completely new tourism experience owned by the people of the Cayman Islands. Since then, I am pleased to further announce that the Government has acquired additional land space under a leasehold agreement for a period of 50 years with the option to renew for an additional 50 years thereafter.

Regarding next steps, building plans are being finalised for submission to the Central Planning Authority for approval. After which, we expect construction to begin in earnest in 2024. As a recap, the concept for this tourism waterfront development will include a restaurant, bar and spaces for entertainment and cultural expression.

In the interim, the craft market space at the Tower Building site is being upgraded until it moves to its permanent location. These upgrades include:

- An expanded area of pavers which will accommodate the covered tent area;
- Improved fencing and greening of the site;
- Provisions for garbage disposal and collection;
- Improved signage; and
- Wheelchair accessibility (which I am so happy my team caught before finishing the design work).

The wheelchair accessibility is something that I want us to be more conscious of in our development around the country, but mainly in the centre part of George Town for many cruise passengers.

2024/25 Projects and Focus

Mr. Speaker, I would now like to turn my attention to address some of the key areas the Ministry and Department of Tourism will be focusing on during the 2024/2025 budget cycle.

I should perhaps preface my remarks by stating that my overarching goal as Minister is to develop a tourism product that is globally competitive, socially and environmentally sustainable, and provides opportunities for our people to flourish. Achieving those objectives requires a range of policies, plans and tactics that operate in harmony, and provide a strategic framework for the continual development of the sector. Given

the industry's dynamic nature, our policies and plans must be regularly revisited, in line with changing circumstances, market trends and sustainability goals.

I am pleased to report that: firstly, the National Tourism Plan has been updated solely for the period between now and the end of 2024, and a new plan will be delivered to cover the period 2025 to 2029.

Also, the Cayman Islands cruise industry strategy is being drafted and will be ready for public consultation by the end of the first quarter of 2024. Just in case the Member is questioning why it has not been completed already— as you can imagine, we went through some turmoil over the previous two and a half months which resulted in a couple months of delay, but it is coming. The team, whom the former Minister knows, works very hard and will have it ready in short order.

Thirdly, the Cayman Islands dive strategy will be expanded to promote the destination as a great choice to “try dive”, to attract families and a younger demographic to this industry. This leverages our calm waters and serves as a perfect entry into this amazing sport. It will also promote the newly opened International Scuba Diving Hall of Fame Museum located at Pedro St. James.

Still on the subject of promoting our destination, \$17.2 million of the DOT's budget is invested globally in advertising, sales and marketing activities—I wish it was a little more, but it is what it is. The Department plans to deliver a diversified and active roster of investments and activities to raise the brand awareness of the Cayman Islands and drive awareness to convert visitors.

It is also recognised that post-pandemic, the Cayman Islands social media feeds and online experiences managed by the Department have seen a significant increase in ads. Consequently, the approach in 2024 and 2025 will see us being even bolder, to ensure the Cayman Islands stands out in the crowded online space. Broadcast opportunities have been confirmed in the DOTs annual media plan for 2024, and includes television partnerships that will cover Culinary, Weddings and honeymoons, Music/Entertainment and Major League Sports.

I should note here, that I intend for there to be a stronger collaboration between the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Sports. We have seen tremendous success with events like North, Central America and Caribbean Volleyball Confederation (NORCECA), the Cayman Islands Marathon, the Cayman Islands Basketball Classic and the Flowers Sea Swim to name a few. In addition, I intend to expand the Ministry's support to include golf, boxing, tennis, water sports, football/soccer, bodybuilding and track and field events – all of which have the ability to bring more awareness of the Cayman Islands to sports fans who are willing to travel and bring revenue to our Islands. It is called sports tourism.

Additionally, the Ministry and DOT are excited about the events that local promoters will bring to the table in 2024/2025. Many of them have already demonstrated that they execute world-class events. We know that people travel for culture, food, entertainment, and relaxation, and we are always open to new ideas to fill a full-year roster of events that celebrate who we are and our Caymanian culture and hospitality.

There is one area I would like to get more into and that is conference tourism. I would be so happy if there was an investor who wanted to provide a purpose-built conference facility here in the Cayman Islands. That would bring so many opportunities to increase our market share in this lucrative tourism sector. I am certain that the former Minister would agree with me on that.

Statutory Authorities

Cayman Islands Airports Authority (CIAA)

Mr. Speaker, I would now like to turn my attention to the statutory authorities which fall under my remit as the Minister of Tourism and Ports, starting first with the Cayman Islands Airports Authority.

Having worked very hard to rebuild its revenue base after the pandemic, the CIAA ended 2022 at 60 per cent of 2019's total revenue. As we know that was the year just after the country re-opened, so that year we were not yet fully back to 'normal'. However, they anticipate ending 2023 at 85 per cent of 2019's total revenue which coincides with the arrival numbers.

This increase has been driven mainly by the steady return to 2019 tourism volumes. As we look ahead, the signs are positive, and the expectation is to achieve and maintain 100 per cent of 2019's revenues through the fourth quarter of 2025.

Earlier this year I announced that the Authority's Airports Master Plan had been successfully updated in the form of a comprehensive 286-page document which built on previous master plans and identified the opportunities and constraints associated with our existing airport infrastructure. The plan also included recommendations for improvement.

Accordingly, the Master Plan Projects being developed for implementation over this budget period includes:

1. A 1,400 foot extension of the runway at the Owen Roberts International Airport (ORIA) that will enable non-stop, long-haul flights to arrive and depart at ORIA.
2. Runway strip works at the Charles Kirkconnell International Airport in Cayman Brac, to address some outstanding regulatory requirements.
3. Development of a new general aviation terminal and aircraft parking apron to accommodate current and projected demand.

Now Mr. Speaker, I want to chime in regarding what the Member of the Opposition said with respect to our focus on the general aviation terminal. I see that the Leader of Opposition has become a master of exaggeration—a good skillset to have as Opposition—but the truth is, the last administration *failed* to bring any attention to general aviation. With us being a tourist destination that focuses on luxury tourism, how could we leave out general aviation, where we all know many high net-worth individuals fly through?

The truth is, we were below standards compared to many other Caribbean islands with respect to this, so though the Leader of Opposition may want to make the country believe that we are using the average persons' money to pay for the rich people, what the Leader of Opposition should also bear in mind is that the wealthy pay their fees too when they land here in the Cayman Islands. Further, if we want to grow as a luxury destination, our standards must be kept to par.

More importantly though, all the monies from the increase in fees, which is only \$15 per person, per ticket will be going to this development and it is only for a select period of time, but the Opposition's job is to exaggerate and make it seem as if we are using the average person to pay for it. We recognise that we do have to cater to all and not all of the money raised will be going to general aviation, much of that money will be going to the expansion of the ORIA runway. Hopefully that clarifies that because I am certain that the Leader of Opposition would hate to be saying that he does not care about those persons who travel in general aviation.

Moving on, Mr. Speaker:

4. The Air Traffic Management Surveillance System – to enable aircraft within the Cayman Islands airspace to be accurately tracked by air traffic controllers, thus improving the safety and efficiency of the Air Traffic Control services.

I am quite sure the whole world and the Cayman Islands people will be happy to know that we are able to be safer at the airport.

5. An Environmental Impact Assessment as a first step in relocating and preparing for the completion of an airport in Little Cayman.
6. The development of conceptual drawings for expanding the terminal at ORIA, to meet current and future demand; or, which will include jetways (also known as boarding bridges) and rain cover on the land side.

I have enquired about the cost of providing temporary jetways in the interim until the long-term master plan implementation is decided. When the information is available to me regarding the cost and whether my colleagues will support the cost for that, I will be making that public. However, we have had some preliminary information, so look out in due course for

our potential announcement about that. I know some Members have recently travelled and recognised the headache of the effects of the rainy season; every rainy season it becomes a heightened issue.

As has been widely reported, there will be a modest increase in the head tax to support these necessary infrastructure improvements. These adjustments are crucial to maintaining the high standards that make the Cayman Islands an exceptional destination.

Mr. Speaker, the Leader of Opposition talked about the increase in fees, and getting ahead of ourselves, and the revenue we have to increase. Now, I recall that the Progressives-led administration was in power for eight years before we took office; and they have explained that they were a Government that did not increase any taxes or fees on the people. Sounds good! Sounds like good politics, but especially when you examine how to run an economy, I think the Leader of Opposition on behalf of his Members should also recognise how you run a company, because they should have been able to recognise that the country was growing and therefore the expenses were also growing. With the population growth we needed to have a service that reflected the need of the economy, yet we still were depending on the same revenue because it was politically good.

The truth is—and it goes back to the revenues at the Airports Authority and the Port Authority. The fees were never increased for over 20 years at the airport, but we were expected to give sophisticated equipment, services, employees and so forth without increasing the revenue. So please, what the problem is here, is that we have many things that we have to address that were not addressed; and we were post-pandemic, which plenty of people seem to have forgotten.

It wasn't cheap to get through the pandemic. I give credit to the last administration and this Administration for helping people so much through the pandemic to give them money in their pocket so that they can survive; but it came with a cost. Now, it seems as if people have forgotten, because the truth is, if you check other Caribbean islands in the region, most of them had to go into debt. Most of them had to go into debt, matter of fact most of them risked their peoples' lives by opening earlier than they should because they were going further into debt and they needed the money from tourism.

You know what we did, which led us to being accused for going further into debt? We decided that we were going to cover the cost, even though it is going to cost us, because we wanted to protect the people. The Opposition and this administration consciously made that decision together to do it at the right time; and it came with a cost. Therefore, let us be fair about the realities, and you know how many millions of dollars we had to pay every month while we were closed. You know how much work the Department and Ministry had to do to catch back up, while the other Caribbean islands had been open for almost six months to a year

before us. Let's be fair about the truth, and let's not be masters of exaggeration for political gain.

Additionally, the CIAA will also be undertaking the following projects and upgrades:

7. Airport security screening equipment upgrade.

We need the money to do it, because it has not been increased in over 20 years. For the facilities at the airport we used to charge one dollar—*one dollar*—for security equipment. This project will replace existing second-generation baggage and passenger screening equipment with the latest advanced technology that will reduce the number of manual searches that cause these long lines, and eliminate the need to remove liquids, gels and electronic equipment from carry-on bags. This will improve the efficiency at the airport.

8. Perimeter fencing to replace the existing fencing around the perimeter of the Charles Kirkconnell International Airport in Cayman Brac.

9. Upgrade the perimeter fencing on the south side of Owen Roberts International Airport.

10. Long-term parking – to address the capacity constraints being experienced on weekends, and to add more parking availability for airport employees.

Sometimes those employees have to park two miles down the road just to get to work, and I feel bad for them.

11. Departure hall expansion – to create more space for departing passengers on the second level. This will ease the congestion on the departure side on peak days.

This is just a snapshot. Other projects will also be undertaken and I will further update the country as they take place.

On the operational side, the Airports Authority will be continuing its recruitment drive to fill a number of vacancies across various departments to ensure that the organisation is properly resourced. Safety is a priority and with increasing volumes of traffic, it is imperative to have the resources required to ensure that passenger safety and security are handled appropriately, as these are the two priority functions in the airport's daily operations.

Cayman Airways

Mr. Speaker, turning now to our national airline Cayman Airways. As an economic accelerator for the Cayman Islands, Cayman Airways is being effectively used to successfully launch new routes - such as Los Angeles and Panama – which allow our country to tap into new markets and reach further afield than ever before. Such gateways are part of a broader national strategy aimed at growing and diversifying our tourism

and financial industries. In partnership with the Department of Tourism and other stakeholders, these routes provide new and easier ways for visitors to travel to and from Cayman, and also open new opportunities for trade and investment.

Looking ahead into 2024/2025, we firmly believe that Cayman Airways will continue to be a significant contributor to the local economy, as it remains an important strategic tool for the Government in achieving positive economic growth.

The purchase of services from Cayman Airways by the Cayman Islands Government is part of a strategic investment in our local economy. Having our own national airline able to be deployed in tandem with our tourism building initiatives, gives us an immense advantage over many other neighbouring countries who compete against us. To that end, the Ministry and Department of Tourism intend to continue to work closely with Cayman Airways to evaluate and develop tourism routes to maximise the return on the country's investment in the national airline.

Pre-COVID, in 2019, the national airline transported 410,000 passengers in a record breaking year, and Cayman Airways is on target to surpass that number in 2023.

You can talk a little louder; make everyone hear you former Minister.

The Speaker: Minister, may I invite you to move the suspension of Standing Order 10(2) in order that—
The Premier.

Suspension of Standing Order 10(2)

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, may I invite the House to move the suspension of Standing Order 10(2) to allow the House to continue beyond the hour of 4.30 p.m., until 9.00 p.m. as you indicated earlier today?

The Speaker: Thank you, Madam Premier.

The question is that Standing Order 10(2) be suspended. All those in favour, please say Aye. Those against, No.

AYES.

The Speaker: The Ayes have it.

Agreed: Standing Order 10(2) suspended.

The Speaker: I invite the Minister speaking to continue.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Where was I? Let me just find my way, Mr. Speaker.

In addition to its own substantial passenger loads, the strategic use of Cayman Airways also provides benefit to the country's tourism industry in other ways.

Over the years, our country has also relied on the national airline to develop new routes into self-sustainable markets. Examples of this are: Chicago, Houston, Dallas; Washington, DC and many others. In fact, almost every route currently operated by other airlines between the Cayman Islands and the United States of America, was started by our national airline Cayman Airways. I think that is worthy of a knock on the table.

[Desk thumping]

Sister Islands

Looking now closer to home, the Government is also very mindful of the needs of our Sister Islands.

In 2023, the Government provided funding for a third Twin Otter aircraft for the national flag carrier, as the Twin Otter is currently the only aircraft that is suitable for Cayman Airways to operate into and out of Little Cayman with more than nine seats. This third aircraft will add a crucial layer of redundancy but, perhaps more importantly, provide an opportunity for more capacity and visitation to Little Cayman.

Also, as the existing fleet of Saab 340B+ aircraft start approaching their retirement age, Cayman Airways has begun to actively evaluate the possibility of a new aircraft type to service Cayman Brac. It is anticipated that this evaluation will be completed during the budget period and a recommendation will be presented to Government for consideration in the coming year.

In 2024, we intend to bring Cayman Airways as closely in line as possible to the core government's requirements under the Public Authorities Act. This legal requirement comes at a significant cost for the airline and hence requires an increase in the Equity Injection it receives from Government. The airline's bottom line has, and will, continue to be affected by this increase in staff costs, but the Equity Injection will mitigate the impact of the increased costs related to employee remuneration and compensation.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to add this point. Sometimes I feel it is unfair, when criticisms are born and we forget the exact decisions that were made to cause the effects of today.

I'll repeat what I said earlier. The Public Authorities Act was made, not in the last administration, but the administration before that. As a result, we now as a Government have to give Cayman Airways more money to be able to be in line with the Civil Service. We never caused that increase; so be careful with the criticisms, because we could be more difficult with respect to our responses. However, we know we are going to do well and we are focused on moving forward as the United People's Movement.

Cayman Islands National Attractions Authority

Mr. Speaker, in April of this year the former Tourism Attractions Board was re-established as the Cayman Islands National Attractions Authority to more closely reflect the functions that it actually performs.

Since then a board has been appointed to manage the achievement of the key strategic goals over the 2024 and 2025 financial years. This will include the Craft Market and the Tourism Waterfront Experience which I spoke about earlier in my contribution.

Cayman Islands Turtle Centre

Turning our attention now to the Cayman Islands Turtle Conservation Centre.

Over the period 2024/25 the Centre will be undertaking the major but necessary project of replacing the seaside saltwater pumps and saltwater replacement pipes.

By way of background Mr. Speaker, the existing pumping station was constructed in 1999, and its current underground water supply pipes are approximately 48 years old. *That's older than I [am], you know. Those pipes might be brittle.* They have faced multiple breaks, particularly under the road. Their age makes them brittle and their long-term reliability remains uncertain. Mr. Speaker, I don't have to say what will happen to our livestock at the Centre if those pipes are no longer functional. When the pipes break, it has a major effect on cost and its critical importance to the lives of the turtles.

At present, the Turtle Centre primarily relies on financial support from the Cayman Islands Government. This reliance would become even more substantial if major cruise lines decide to omit Grand Cayman from their itineraries.

Mr. Speaker, I am going to have to go back to that very sensitive area, because sometimes we don't recognise the decision and how it trickles down to other places. We subsidise the Turtle Centre to a very large amount and sometimes those subsidies are for turtle meat—which I'll get to shortly. If our cruise numbers continue to decline, it's also going to affect our ability to operate the Turtle Farm. It costs us millions and millions of dollars. We're not making a profit from turtle meat.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: The impact from the decline in passengers would be significant, Mr. Speaker. This is another reason why it is necessary for us to have a clear understanding from the people, of what the country's true position is, regarding the cruise industry.

Looking ahead Mr Speaker, although I am happy with the work the Centre is doing, there remains a big concern regarding the availability of turtle meat. I

heard there was once a turtle meat session in Parliament and I hope this doesn't cause too much concern but allow me to read. The ability to sustainably meet rising demand is in question. I intend to meet with the Board and CEO in the New Year to discuss best strategies moving forward.

Mr. Speaker, we will make announcements later as to how critical the circumstances are but it has been brought to my attention.

Port Authority Cayman Islands

Mr. Speaker, continuing now with the Port Authority.

During the 2024 and 2025 budget period, the Port Authority plans to undertake a number of projects; including upgrading the docks in George Town, Spotts, Cayman Brac and Little Cayman. These docks are between 30 and 45 years old, and are showing various levels of wear and tear. They require urgent refurbishment and maintenance to keep them operating in a safe and efficient manner.

The Port Authority will also be purchasing some much needed equipment to replace and augment their aging fleet of container-handling equipment, and improve the infrastructure to keep them operating optimally.

To this end, the Port Authority plans to acquire:

- A dock side crane to add to the two 35-year-old container cranes;
- Two container handler forklifts; and
- Three chassis and fleet vehicles to support the fleet at the Cargo Distribution Centre

The Port will also continue the Channel Marker project started last fiscal year, and plans to acquire two new vessels; one for the Harbour Patrol Division in Grand Cayman and the other for the Port Authority in Cayman Brac.

These and other activities will extend the functional useful life of the Port assets to enable them to be used in the delivery of cargo, and providing a safe and pleasant environment for our cruise guests.

Cargo Port Redevelopment

Mr. Speaker, having provided a brief overview on each of the statutory authorities, I would now like to spend some time updating the public on matters concerning the cargo port.

By way of background for the public's understanding, I should begin by stating that our cargo port serves as the main port of entry for at least 95 per cent of imported goods in the Cayman Islands. During the day, it is used for cruise operations and it transitions to cargo port operations at night, between the hours of 6.00 p.m. and 5.00 a.m.

It has been commonly known for some time that the cargo port is struggling to handle the levels of cargo being imported to sustain the demands of our

rapidly growing population. This situation is further compounded by two main issues:

1. Cargo vessels that currently service our islands are reaching the end of their lifespans. As they transition out of service they are being replaced with larger vessels. When fully loaded, these larger vessels require a deeper draft, that is, they need to be in deeper water than exists at the Port currently.
2. The newer cargo ships are also much wider and carry containers stacked 8 or 10 across. The two cranes operated by the Port Authority have a reach of 6 across and are incapable of lifting containers across vessels with such a wide span.

Aside from these issues, as the level of imported cargo increases, the port will face challenges due to limitations with the size of its container storage area, trucking capacity, warehouse capacity and its ability to provide service to customers with respect to revenue collection and cargo delivery.

Mr. Speaker, taking all of these issues into account, the reality is, the country will be faced with a crisis if a solution to the cargo port capacity issues is not identified soon.

Earlier this year I advised the public that Cabinet had granted its approval for a business case to be developed, which would look at the benefits and costs of either expanding the cargo port at its current location in George Town, or establishing a new port at an alternative location.

I am pleased to report that after a comprehensive Request for Proposals (RFP) process, KPMG has been appointed to develop the business case. It is anticipated that early in 2024, during January or February, an information gathering exercise will be undertaken and from this, the team will be able to review options for moving forward. I look forward to updating the country when that information comes in.

Marketing and promotions – travelling to conferences

Mr. Speaker, I think it's important that I address another elephant in the room, and that is, the way that I market and promote these beautiful Cayman Islands.

When our borders reopened, I embarked on an extensive roadshow letting the world know that we were open for business and were ready to give travellers the kinds of experiences they would remember forever, and be keen to repeat. Taking that approach bore fruit and helped to increase our visitation numbers. I started this year with the same approach, doubling down to interact with the movers and the shakers, and decision-makers in tourism. Over the course of this year my Ministry selectively targeted some of the most lucrative travel and trade fairs to consistently promote our Islands' attributes.

On their recommendation, I delivered keynote speeches at a variety of well-chosen conferences and spoken on numerous panels ensuring that the Cayman Islands perspective as an industry leader is sought after and well documented. These have included:

- The Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Associations' (CHTA) Caribbean Travel Marketplace, showcasing our islands vibrant tourism product;
- The Caribbean Infrastructure Forum (CARIF);
- The Caribbean Tourism Organisation's (CTO) Tourism Week, in New York;
- The CTO State of the Tourism Industry Conference (SOTIC), in Turks and Caicos this year;
- The Caribbean Association of Bankers (CAB), in Trinidad; and
- The Caribbean Investment Summit, among others.

Mr. Speaker, on the surface, it might seem strange for me as Tourism Minister to be speaking at a banking and investment summit. The fact is, Tourism is an industry with a high percentage of micro, small and medium-sized businesses. In many instances, the lack of access to capital is a major hindrance to their ability to grow and develop. This has become worse since the pandemic, which forced many small businesses to permanently close, and it has become even worse with the rising interest rates.

Here at home, I have introduced the Visitor Experience Development Fund which I spoke of earlier, to aid those caught in this situation. Also, at the regional level, my Chairmanship of the CTO also provides additional opportunities for me to address all kinds of tourism related issues.

In this particular instance, I was able to speak with regional banks and financial institutions to advocate for more support and funding for micro and small businesses operating in the tourism space in the Caribbean region.

For those who might be wondering how that could possibly benefit small businesses in the Cayman Islands, the answer is quite simple, Mr. Speaker. When banks like the Republic Bank headquartered in Trinidad and Tobago make the decision to provide more capital funding for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), that decision impacts the customers in *all* of their holdings—including their customers in our beloved Cayman National Bank, which recently merged with the Republic Bank.

Although there doesn't appear to be a connection on the surface, there usually always is, Mr. Speaker. We don't go to these conferences for fun. As a matter of fact, it's becoming more burdensome than ever. This is just one small example of the type of exposure and benefit that our Islands receive through my CTO Chairmanship role.

However, I digressed Mr. Speaker, because I was speaking about my attendance at various forums

promoting the Cayman Islands. It boggles my mind that people find it so hard to understand that as Minister of Tourism my job is to promote the Cayman Islands, and I cannot always do that while sitting behind my desk, Mr. Speaker. Why? Because it is vital that our Islands maintain a physical presence at important conferences and industry-related trade shows, not just to keep the business we currently have, but also to keep on building, growing, networking and influencing key decision-makers in the tourism space.

I can assure you Mr. Speaker, that it isn't easy being in this very competitive industry, trying to outshine and outperform destinations that are larger in size, have more money in their budget for marketing, have a more diverse tourism product, and in some cases, have beaches that are as impressive as Seven Mile Beach and extend as far as the eye can see from either side. I've seen it. I've had the luxury on behalf of the good people of this country to be exposed to it.

It seems that some people have quickly forgotten that the whole world went through the COVID pandemic. Some destinations took that as an opportunity to upgrade their tourism product; others used the time to bring entirely new products to their markets. What they *all* seemed to have done was embark on campaigns to bring visitors back to their jurisdictions, and the Cayman Islands should be no different in that regard.

Pent up demand is no longer at the level it was when borders reopened globally which means we have to work harder to attract attention and bring visitors to our islands to experience George Town, Bodden Town, West Bay, Cayman Brac, North Side and everywhere in between. I didn't miss anywhere, did I?

Some Hon. Members: East End.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: East End. Minister, I apologise. I'll make it up to you.

Over the coming budget period, having seen first-hand how effective personal interaction can be, I intend to maintain our Islands high visibility and presence at strategic events. In 2024, the Ministry will shift its focus to include other niche areas with the potential to drive incremental tourism such as fashion, film, music and the arts. We have to diversify our offerings as you heard me say earlier, conference tourism.

On that note, I am pleased to advise, Mr. Speaker, that we now have a film rebate policy approved by Cabinet that will help to attract film production companies to the Cayman Islands as the destination for their productions.

The policy provides for a rebate for productions that have injected at least \$250,000 into our economy, and provides a pathway for Caymanians to provide labour and support services to these productions, as well as receive training.

Mr. Speaker, I am committed, my team is committed, and in my opinion they are some of the most

professional, qualified and competent tourism ambassadors in the entire region! I see my team work, competing against the rest of them and we are one of the smallest jurisdictions among them all.

Mr. Speaker, my aim for Tourism has not changed since I took on this portfolio. In 2024, I look forward to promoting and marketing the Cayman Islands to the best of my ability, because that is what the industry requires in order to be successful. The Caymanian business people expect me to get numbers here so they can make money. It is also what our tourism partners want and expect from me because when tourism is strong, our retail and hospitality sectors, and our workers' gratuities are bigger and better. Our people earn more wages and the ripple effect goes round and round the economy.

On the flip side of that equation, as well as attending such events overseas, the Ministry and Department of Tourism have also worked hard to bring conferences here. As a matter of fact, I received a notification there is a Women's Police Conference that's to be coming. Anyone aware of it?

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: Just got that notice today. I'm telling you, conference tourism is a good money maker.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry and the Department of Tourism have also worked hard to bring conferences here injecting revenue into our economy and bringing world-class experiences to our shores for our people to participate in and benefit from, like the FCCA PAMAC Conference and the wedding summit which I spoke about earlier. That was a really good conference. I am so proud of my team for bringing that here.

Those are just two examples of successful strategies that have paid dividends in terms of generating future bookings for our destination; and you can trust and believe our hoteliers are happy, bookings are up and the future is looking bright.

Mr. Speaker, the truth is, we may say some things about tourism but you know, Marc Langevin hasn't called me in about seven months.

An Hon. Member: That's good.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: If he's not calling me, things good. I can promise you that. For those who are listening, Marc Langevin is the former President of the Cayman Islands Tourism Association (CITA).

We may have a little grumble here and there but mostly the people are happy with the numbers that we have. *Can we get more?* Of course! Ask anyone what they want more of, unless it's bills.

[Laughter]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: Mr. Speaker, we are on the right track. To be honest with you, we have been criticised for not returning to 2019 numbers. However, if we were back to 2019 numbers already, think about the traffic we're dealing with right now. What would be out there? It may make sense for us to do this proper, gradual growth back to those numbers, while my good Minister who is in charge of infrastructure, opens some more roads like he did yesterday so we can get back there without the negative effects that many people used to complain about in 2019.

Mr. Speaker, it is evident from my contribution today that the Cayman Islands tourism sector has demonstrated exceptional resilience and performance, and has significantly contributed to the economic well-being of our nation.

The revenue generated has been instrumental in funding crucial public services, infrastructural development, and social welfare programs that you heard our Honourable Premier speak to on Friday.

As the Minister with responsibility for this second pillar to our economy, I am extremely proud of all that the staff in my Ministry, Department and Statutory Authorities have accomplished. They worked hard. I am honoured to be their Minister.

Manifesto Promises Achieved

Beyond the achievements of my Ministry, I am mindful that it is sometimes expressed that the promises made on the campaign trail are for the sole purpose of winning elections. Once elected they are quickly forgotten.

Mr. Speaker, I not only stand by my own campaign promises, I am proud to say that many of them have been achieved, and steady progress is being made towards the achievement of those which are not yet completed. For example, Mr. Speaker:

I advocated for government to purchase land that is being transformed, ever so beautifully, as we speak into the Central Stranton Community Park and I can't wait to execute that ribbon cutting and I hope, Mr. Speaker, you'll be right there with me because we've been on this journey together a long time.

I've advocated for the increase in the amount of \$35,000 to \$50,000 for people to withdraw from their pensions and I'm pleased that it is now in effect, and I want to thank my good friend, the good Member for Bodden Town West. We have been advocating for that since we were in Opposition. It is finally here, and I'm happy to say that the good Minister responsible has ensured that the Gazette was finalised... on Friday? On Friday.

I've also advocated for the benefits provided to seafarers to be increased. Now, I know the Opposition is going to want to take credit for that, because they were the first ones to say it on the Floor, but what they didn't know was that the good Honourable Deputy Premier was already in the works before any notion of

you requesting it; but I understand the politics of it. I did it when I was in Opposition too. The first one who gets out there to say it will try to get the credit—“*See? They did it because I said so.*” The Honourable Deputy Premier was working on that for a long time, but we were managing our monies, right. We had to do it at the right time.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: I've also advocated for the reintroduction of the GGHAM Programme, Mr. Speaker, which has now been re-established under a new programme called HOME, which stands for Home Ownership Mortgage Empowerment Programme. That's all in my Manifesto.

I've also advocated for an increase in the minimum wage and as you heard earlier, a report has been completed and noted by Cabinet and I anticipate the Minister responsible will speak more to that in due course.

Mr. Speaker, the list can go on but the point I'm making illustrates that it is totally possible for members of a government made up of independents to get things done. Maybe it's the leadership, because when a group of like-minded individuals get together for the greater good of the people, there's no limit to what can be achieved and I truly believe in my heart that we are going to accomplish much in the next 12 months.

Mr. Speaker, I'll be making my own announcements regarding what I've been able to accomplish. There's a time and a place for campaigning and this is not the time for that; my people will hear more from me in the New Year and just if I can sneak this in: George Town Central, I love you. As I mentioned before, Mr. Speaker, to underscore the unity within the United People's Movement is not just a rallying cry for political co-operation, but a demonstration that all challenges can be overcome for the greater good from a position of togetherness.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, it's not by chance that the word “people” is included at the centre of the United People's Movement. Neither is it there just to describe a collective mass, but rather in recognition of the diversity, the aspirations and the dreams of each individual person who calls these Islands home. I trust it has been evident within my contribution to this debate, that the policies and the programmes undertaken by the Ministry of Tourism and Ports have been crafted with a keen understanding of the needs of the people and recognising that true progress can only be achieved when every citizen is empowered to achieve irrespective of their background or their circumstances.

Forward Looking

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I believe I can speak confidently on behalf of the Ministry in stating that we are

forward thinking, visionary, and resolute in our dedication to shaping our tourism industry in ways which will align with the aspirations of the Caymanian people. We are working hard to create a tourism product that is globally competitive, environmentally and socially sustainable, and provides meaningful opportunities for investment and career growth. I'm heartened by the progress we have made, Mr. Speaker, and I look forward to making even greater strides in the coming year.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, I would like to take a moment to specifically acknowledge our civil servants because the truth is, having worked in the Government Administration Building for over two years now, I have really seen how hard working, dedicated committed, and efficient our civil servants can be. They are the conduit for delivering our government's policies and our services and a huge cross section of our population interacts with them, and depend on them every single day.

Mr. Speaker, I know the Government has granted an honorarium to civil servants as a way of thanking them for their service, and if it was up to me, I would give them another \$1,500 if I had the money, but we don't have it right now. I want to take this opportunity to personally say my own heart-felt thanks to you, each and every one of you because, trust me, the work that you do on behalf of the government is greatly appreciated.

With that being said, Mr. Speaker, I look forward to charting a course in 2024-2025, along with my colleagues on this side, towards a brighter and more unified future for all who call these beautiful Islands home. I wish everyone hearing my voice a peaceful and merry Christmas, and all the very, very best for 2024.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Desk thumping]

The Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Does any other Member wish to speak? *[Pause]*

The Member for West Bay West.

Hon. W. McKeever Bush: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, before I begin, I would like to put on record birthday wishes for Mrs. Madona. I think you know that person, Mr. Speaker. My friend, Mrs. Madona, who is 92 today; and birthday wishes to Mrs. Laverne Ryan, in Cayman Brac, whose birthday was yesterday.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to do what might be my last budget debate, should I choose not to run again. Mr. Speaker, this budget being my 39th such debate covering forty and a half years inclusive of the budget for 2025. If I exit politics in 2025, God willing, it will be forty and a half years that I have served my people as an Elected Member of this honourable House, and that brings to thought many, many, things, Mr. Speaker.

I enjoyed the speech from my Colleague, the Minister for Tourism and he talked about how much he had to travel. Well, I can never forget the criticism he put on me on one of your platforms, Mr. Speaker, about my traveling for tourism, so I had to think, *"What a difference a day makes"*; but, I think that our tourism is in good hands. The things that he has outlined are what are needed, and I will get to at least one of them a little later.

The budget, Mr. Speaker, in 1985, was about two inches thick. Look at it today. Some might say, not good for our people, but coming from where Cayman mostly did what was thought best for Cayman, the thousand pages today says much of how Cayman has followed the world in putting in place bureaucratic practices. That has not boded well for efficiencies, as much as one might think that international governmental practices would, or should, help small-island developing states like ours. However, the cost that bureaucracy in the name of better standards and better governance is costing this country is no small amount, when those who push us into it are no example for any small country to follow.

Well, Mr. Speaker, this budget will likely be my shortest debate. My longest was a full two days. This UPM administration, is about building Caymanians and giving opportunities to our people— finding ways and means to make Cayman better, so the next 14 months mean work, work, work, work and more work. I am Parliamentary Secretary in two Ministries, and I have two Ministers who know how to get things done, and know that we are expected to deal with the problems affecting our Islands. Certainly, Mr. Speaker, we cannot get everything done, but we can start to fix the many situations affecting our people— traffic, cost of living, housing, immigration matters, crime... and on crime, we have to ensure that more of our people are working; and I know we get quotes and get figures that say we have a very small unemployment ratio, but there are people, for whatever reason, and I think putting them to work will help to bring a reduction in criminal behaviour.

Mr. Speaker, there are several things in the budget that I want to mention before I sit down. Mr. Speaker, the additional increase to government pensioners has met with much appreciation, and I'm glad that the Premier took that on immediately and dealt with it in time for this pay day for them. We still have to look at those who get less than \$100 or \$300 to \$900. We must bring them up to something more than that, but we have done well.

One thing we need to remember, and one unique and important feature of any pension administered by the Public Service Pensions Board is that these pensions have automatic annual inflation protections. In response to inflation in 2022, substantive pensions for all public servants was augmented by 8.3 per cent and this was paid during 2023 retroactive to January this year. This is a very important feature that helps pensioners who are living on fixed incomes to be able

to keep up with the cost of basic necessities and it is estimated that more than 2000 pensioners would have received that year's 8.3 per cent augmentation, which is what we call COLA, for pensioners; and 589 pensioners are receiving the ex gratia uplift taking their pension now to \$1,250. They are deserving, these pensioners, Mr. Speaker, who are in their old age.

Some are not receiving anything much because they didn't work long, but if they worked one or four years, then they worked, not to say because salaries might have been small, that they can get what the person who worked twenty years or thirty years and made a bigger salary [gets], because that's how pensions work, but I know that the Premier is working on the aspect of the uplift for the others and I'm hoping that she will be able to report positively what we have been talking about.

Mr. Speaker, we have a good cadre of civil servants. Some work very, very hard; some work harder than others, of course, but we have to be thankful that we can get the kind of service, and not all of it is what we wanted, we know that, but by and large, the country is well-served, it is well served. Further, no one should feel that our civil servants shouldn't get the considerations that this Government just granted. They deserve it. They deserve more but we can't; we can only do so much to show appreciation. It means much when we do that.

Mr. Speaker, it was also good of the Minister responsible, to have given Seamen, what veterans we have left, and others that are in need, through the Social Development Ministry, \$250 extra, I think it is, for Christmas. It shows that we care about them. Mr. Speaker, one of our biggest problems now is cost of living, so this helps those persons who are at that level. We did bring it up to \$1,250, and were able to do that extra \$250 this month which carries it— for the month, anyway— to \$1,500; so I want to say thank you publicly, to the Minister and the colleagues who are working to make it happen.

We have a situation, and I am talking about the cost of living, Mr. Speaker. Something that I noticed is the high cost if you have to do renovations or additions to your house, and I imagine what poor people— I had to tell someone this week, *"look if you all keep up with this kind of pricing..."* [because] it looked to me like two or three times the value. Instead of getting \$150 a day, it seems to me that they want to carry home \$400, \$500 a day and it is job work they claim.

I said to the person, *"Look, if this keeps up, people are not going to be able to fix their homes; they're not going to be able to renovate and fix because they can't afford it; and what that means, is that the standard of living and housing in this country will go down, unless it gets so ridiculous, that some government says, 'Hey, enough is enough', and puts some sort of rate on it"*. It is what I see happening. I don't know how poor people are going to get ahead, or get their homes renovated or fixed—yes, government is

doing much of that, but I'm talking about these people, whom the government can't help; or is not able to help; or who are not applying to government. Don't need government's help but yet, they are getting to the point where they cannot pay for a leaking roof, they can't even pay for plumbers, so I am asking one and all out there to remember that not all Caymanians are millionaires.

Mr. Speaker, it's a good thing for government to purchase land. As we all know, government does not own land or much land, and the Minister and Premier, and other Ministers now, are looking at different properties that they could purchase—for different needs, of course; and I think it is a good thing. I'm in support of purchasing property in Barkers; Barkers is special.

We paid a visit... I didn't have to, because I go there regularly, but in 2003 I purchased 163 acres there, and since then government also bought some of the head of Barkers and opened the Barkers' National Park with the Prince when he was here some years ago. I am encouraging the Premier and the Minister of Sustainability to reinstate the Barkers' Rangers. Those men's seven, eight or nine families were making an income from that and Barkers' was spick and span. Tourists went there, spread their blankets, and had candlelight dinner in the evening. I've seen them there. Made their own, I guess. It was a place.

If you want to go right now, it looks like they are still stealing the sand from there. I don't know that we can police all of that, but what else the rangers did besides... they did much work to clean it up. Barkers' National Park, we called it, and it slowed down the drug [smuggling] boats. It slowed them down because there was always activity up there. We know; at least I had some reports saying it slowed down there, so I'm encouraging. If you are going to keep it or I buy it, plus what we got, we need to reinstate, hopefully, something like the rangers, or whatever they call them.

I am pleased, Mr. Speaker, that the Minister of Health was able to put in place a new dialysis machine in our district clinic which will serve those persons who need such care in the district. That is a big improvement for us. There are some roads that need to be done. I know that some of the other constituencies are probably worse off than mine. West Bay West is pretty well served and I must say that while I was Speaker, the PPM did help in getting roads cleared and widened. We did well and still have some, but I know other constituencies in the district needs more.

Mr. Speaker, two things that I want to speak about briefly—and I know this might not go down well in the House but it is how I feel. With all the hell people are going through with the banking sector, I think it is time we should utilise our Development Bank, the Cayman Islands Development Bank, with full banking services in strategic districts.

Cayman is one of the largest banking centres in the world. I know we've lost—we used to have 500, I think the last big figure I'd heard some years ago, was

532 banks, but it has gone down now to something like 92. That sector has lost tremendously, but we are still one of the largest banking centres in the world, with a very highly regulated and respected banking oversight body in Cayman Islands Monetary Authority (CIMA). Government can put in all the restrictions needed to make it a proper bank.

The Cayman Islands' Moody's financial rating is Aa3. An excellent credit rating, Mr. Speaker, it is the same as the United Kingdom and Qatar, for instance. What this means, is that investors express confidence in the Cayman Islands, and as such, are comfortable investing directly in the Cayman Islands, hence the booming property market, for instance, that we see; because of the confidence in us. It won't be hard to draw depositors to the Development Bank and we are going to have to do something because I've seen an article recently from a well-respected person in the community. I mean, people are being put through a wringer to do business and so we have to shed some of that.

Although Cayman has one of the highest GDPs Mr. Speaker, it also has the highest cost of living. That is due to many factors, of course—high mortgage rates, high food costs, high housing costs, high medical costs, high property and personal insurance rates, less healthy population, less healthy lifestyles, nutrition and fitness. That's the stress we are going through and much of it is financial stress, so I would hope that could be looked at and taken on board.

The Cayman Islands must take a bold approach, I feel, as one of the leading financial centres of the world and identify itself as such with confidence; with its own bank and financial administration—and we can do that, I think, in stages, to ensure the government bank is run under proper stewardship, experience, and highly-qualified bankers. Put in place regulations to govern exposure and good banking, receive deposits and manage liquidity. Later on, expand operations to lend to Caymanian homeowners at reasonable rates, and thereon continue to expand banking. Regular review, regular audits of operations to minimise the risk; a strong internal audit team reporting to CIMA. We have the means. We have the means; I don't know if we got the guts and the political will to do so, but I know it can work—and we should work to make it happen.

The other matter, Mr. Speaker: I was glad to hear my colleague the Minister speak about cruise tourism, because it is something that is near and dear to my heart. Why? Because cruise tourism is where Caymanians have invested; in boats, in vehicles. We don't own hotels or big condo blocks, but they own a boat. They would borrow to get their boat. Therefore, it's not time to pull back and listen to some of the naysayers because the truth is, it was a huge fight for me back in 2000 all the way through, to get them to accept that cruise tourism could bring, not only just that visitor for the day, they come here and they see what they like, then they come back. We instituted such a programme to come back, and it works, they see it and they'll come.

Years ago, people got off the boat and never went back to the United States, and I'm not talking about poor people either. Very wealthy people have done that. Cayman is still attractive.

I know we're getting all this feedback about mashing up the environment, and as I said some time ago, Mr. Speaker, we still have a pristine environment. When you're up that high in the plane and you can see the bottom of the ocean as clear as anything, in of course, shallow water, but you can see it. Some places if you go to the ocean, you put in your hand, and you can't see your hand.

We are lucky and we are blessed. Therefore, I urge the Minister to put some effort into building a pier, as I said earlier when he was speaking, at the Cayman Turtle Farm for instance. The Farm was built with the intention for a pier, for a ship a day to pay for the farm.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: That's the kind of business plan we had after the farm got mashed up in that hurricane that passed us and we had to move. The industry took the decision to rebuild it on the next side and do these things because we didn't have many attractions to go to. Tourists didn't have many attractions to go to. You've got a few now. However, that's the reason we built and removed the Turtle Farm from off of the shore side, to protect it. We lost tons of breeders when the farm got mashed up.

Put it there, put a pier there, a ship a day. Plus, you know what, the cruise industry will work with the Government to do it; they will. I took the captains from Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association, they came here and they went, they said this is a perfect place. You don't have to do anything because the deep water is probably 50ft-60ft off of the shoreline. You've got the deep water right there. They said it's better than George Town because how they have to anchor and the thing is that they have to anchor there.

Therefore, I will urge UPM to support that initiative. Talk to Michele Paige; I know you do Minister, and I know it is something that can happen. We put it off for too long now, and we are spending millions and millions of dollars on Cayman Turtle Farm when we could have been putting money into it to come into Government coffers, because that was the intention it was built for.

What I went through to get it, it wasn't long that it was built before Benson [Ebanks] had said that time in the meeting, *they prayed a good prayer to the Lord*, but it wasn't long when they started to talk that they threw God through the window; and it wasn't long that they started cursing me about it. It wasn't long that they brought the police to investigate. George McCarthy had to tell them, *this is the best financing deal that you could get*, but they brought the police. Oh yeah.

I thank people like the late Mr. Bob Soto who was on the board and others who gave such valid information and valid recommendations for the farm. The farm is not reaching its financial goal because it is inhibited. We need that ship there; it was built for that purpose. I said I'm going to encourage our Government to do that.

Before I close, Mr. Speaker, I want to say thanks to some civil servants who go above and beyond their duty like, Ms. Rosa Harris, our Director of Tourism; Tamara "Tammy" Hurlston, who's the director for NAU. No matter what time, [if] she's away or something strikes me and then I write her a letter—because some of you know that I stay up late. You know I'll write or call too—I wrote her because I said well in the morning she will read it. Sometimes I'm so surprised that that lady answers me. [It] could be 11/12 o'clock at night. She is a hard worker and I don't know how much thanks she gets from the public. A good, hardworking young lady is Tammy Hurlston.

[Desk thumping]

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: Gloria McField-Nixon, a very professional lady and a hard, hard worker to help things get done. Paulinda Mendoza-Williams is another one taking care of the needs of our people. These are hardworking ladies, and others who are real workers in the Civil Service; and I want to say thanks to all of them, thanks to all of them.

Before I sit down, Mr. Speaker, I want to wish all our people a very Merry Christmas and much hope for a better year ahead. I urge all to take time to look for family, spend some time with family as today we are here and today we could be gone.

I'm hopeful, Mr. Speaker—I hear the naysayers—but I'm hopeful for our Islands' future. We have much to be thankful for. God has been good to us. I urge you all to do whatsoever we can, to do good. Stop thinking negatively; let's build up, not tear down. Stop lying on people trying to get popularity; stop lying!

Help those in need, take care of our children, and our parents where any need exists, because when we lose them, we lost our best friends.

I want to thank the Ministers who I think have taken a new lease on their tenure and are going to get good things done. This budget, I think, is fair.

I remember the days Mr. Speaker, when we said, *boy, if we can only make a million dollars surplus*. Sometimes we didn't, went into negatives but by the time the next one came around, we were back up, and [we] didn't help people as much as what we do today. Look at how much we are doing for education, how much education has improved. The Minister has done extremely, extremely well in some of the programmes that are put forward, and we need to understand that, we need to let our people understand that this is no easy walk.

I know some of them who believe that all they got to do is open their mouth and they *gonna* get elected. Then when they get here they might not hold that position as long as they hold some jobs, which they don't hold jobs; one job in a year and gone to the next one and they think that it's easy to come in here and run this country. Cayman is not an easy country to run anymore.

All those who want to talk about the good old days... Good old days? We had to build what we got here, Mr. Speaker, hard work. Yes, we can look back on our people but administrations in the last 30-40 years have done extremely well for this country. Yes, some things could be better. Yes, we know that. I said I was closing but I did have one last point, probably two.

The Leader of Opposition said much about a plan. Between 2009 and 2012, I started work on a country plan. Mr. Kenneth Ebanks and Mr. Leonard Dilbert were put in charge through the Premier's Office. It's over 13 years now and still no plan. All of us know how badly a very good plan is needed. Development can't stop. These people think they can just stop it, but where are they going to get money from to do anything here. We have to have a better balance of what we do, but we can do that, we can manage.

Therefore, I'm hoping, as a small developing state, with all kinds of possibilities on our doorstep... People want to do care. *[Sic]* We are not going to sit down here and dry up and die as some people would like the world to believe. Much of our economic existence depends on development. We have to have discipline, what we want, how to get it and where we must put it. Those are the things that we have to consider.

Yes, I am for going higher in building heights; whether it's 20 [storeys] or whether it's 25 [storeys] we need to do it to save property. Half of our island is North Sound, you're not building out there; the water, next half still loads of swamp creating mosquitos. Anyway, you know that we have to save some of it because that's what the environment [is] about.

However, I do know that there have been changes—no one is telling me, I'm 67, will be 68 in January, God willing—and I've seen the changes. There are things that are happening and we can do some things about it, but don't talk about stopping.

Now having said that, I want to say to my Frontbench, bring that law and change that Council that is stopping everything. Where in the world, Mr. Speaker, do you hear one government department suing another government department, where? [It] should not have been allowed to happen. Giving that kind of power to people who are extreme on one side about not doing anything—they don't want anything it seems like, must be back in the '50s. Who wants to sleep with a cardboard fan?

[Laughter]

Hon. W. McKeever Bush: Who wants... And they use this thing like it's sexy. Oh, that's good, that's heritage. *Heritage?* Yeah, we had to do so but it was not a good thing. It wasn't a good thing to have an outside little kitchen. Cayman has done well, we've come far, and we've made a good standard of living. We need to take care of our people and that's what we are all about.

I know that the housing matter was raised and the Opposition Leader called for a policy. I won't tell you what Mr. Ronald Martin told the Planning Department, *I don't need a plan, I need a house.*

[Laughter]

Hon. W. McKeever Bush: People need a building, they need a house. Policy, plan, of course Mr. Leader, are important. Yes, but when you see the need and you act and put something in place, that's the plan. Yes, we have to have policy but people need a house. Thus, I want to encourage my Minister in his work that he's doing to try to put houses in, but not enough. We just don't have enough money to do what we would like to do for housing and get people in a house. We've got several plans.

I think I've gone past the time I allotted myself. However, I want to again say, I am hopeful, Mr. Speaker, for our Island. We can't be a salvation army to the whole world, but we can get good people here with a good immigration policy and keep good people here and make them feel like they are spending, and when they spend, they will give to our social clubs. That's what happens when people are happy with where they are, they contribute, and that's what we need.

Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for your time.

[Desk thumping]

The Speaker: Thank you, Member for West Bay West. The Minister of Culture and various other things.

[Laughter]

The Speaker: The Minister of Youth, Sports and Heritage.

They change these so often I can't remember.

Hon. Isaac D. Rankine, Minister of Youth, Sports & Heritage, Elected Member for East End: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, as I stand to address this honourable House, I do so with great sense of pride as I am grateful and humbled by the opportunity to present and give an outline of the plans for the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Heritage.

However, right off the bat, Mr. Speaker, I want to recognise the hardworking and committed people of

East End, the district which I have the honour of representing. I also want to express sincere gratitude to the Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly for affording me the opportunity to serve in this capacity, together with my Cabinet colleagues with whom I have the pleasure of working as a part of the United People's Movement. I'm particularly pleased to have the support of Parliamentary Secretary, Mr. Bernie Bush, whose wealth of knowledge and experience will help propel us forward in achieving the Ministry and Government priorities.

Mr. Speaker, as I rise to deliver my budget address on the 2024-2025 Financial Year for the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Heritage, I want to state that it is not just a fiscal plan but a commitment to our purpose which is to preserve our past and strengthen our future.

Mr. Speaker, our budget reflects our appreciation and the understanding of the critical role that youth, sports and heritage play in shaping a future where every young mind is a beacon of potential; every sporting experience is a platform to exhibit excellence; and every expression of heritage, a testament of what it means to be Caymanian.

With that said Mr. Speaker, I would like to bring to the attention of Members of this honourable House, the accomplishments of the Ministry of Youth, Sports, Culture and Heritage, now known as the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Heritage.

We have responsibility, Mr. Speaker, for two government Departments and three Statutory Authorities and Government Companies namely, Department of Sports, Youth Services Unit, the National Gallery of the Cayman Islands, Cayman National Cultural Foundation and the Cayman Islands National Museum. These entities play pivotal roles in fostering physical wellbeing, talent development, youth empowerment, cultural preservation, and awareness of the Cayman Islands' heritage. Together, they contribute significantly to our community and who we are as a nation.

However, while acknowledging the fiscal challenges within these subject areas, Mr. Speaker, my Ministry remains steadfast in advocating for, and ensuring the fulfilment of, our three priorities.

1. Talent identification and development;
2. Enhancement and empowerment of our youth; and
3. Awareness and preservation of culture and heritage.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry's accomplishments during the 2022-2023 budget cycle were many and the team undertook several key initiatives which will be elaborated upon in our upcoming end-of-year report. Among these accomplishments, a significant amount of effort has been directed towards a comprehensive review of the various policy frameworks which currently exists for youth, sports, culture and heritage. These include a review of: the National Youth Policy, the National Sports Policy, and the National Culture and Heritage policies for the Cayman Islands.

The Ministry also recognised the need for a comprehensive review and development of operational policies for entities to ensure best practices, reduce liabilities and risk, as well as provide for safe and secure programmes and facilities. Such reviews help identify strengths and challenges to ensure that with the implementation of new policies, the operational components of the entities are in place.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, we embarked on many capital works and renovations on 11 of our sports stadiums and sites across all districts. This extensive project encompassed upgrades, refurbishments, enhanced seating, as well as installation of advanced lighting and proper irrigation system for the fields.

I am pleased to share, Mr. Speaker, that the Ministry has successfully completed the procurement process for updating the National Youth and National Sports policies. These strategic initiatives are tailored to update the current policies which are dated or expired, and to meet the existing and imminent needs of our communities. Such policies will serve to enhance youth and sports policies, programmes and projects for the Cayman Islands and aims to support the overarching vision, values and strategic direction for youth and sports development in our country. This comprehensive update seeks to align every facet of the policy with the evolving landscape of the Cayman Islands.

Mr. Speaker, both policy updates are slated to commence in January 2024, and will involve significant stakeholder engagement analysis and input. These policies will be long-term strategies and make accommodation for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of achieving the outcomes.

Aligned with this, Mr. Speaker, we have taken proactive steps to re-establish the National Youth Commission and establish the first National Sports Commission which will support the efforts of the Department of Sports and the Youth Services Unit. Both commissions are being diligently worked on behind the scenes to set comprehensive parameters and criteria laying the necessary groundwork on the essential review of these much needed national youth and sports policies.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to pause and express heartfelt appreciation to the dedicated members of the commissions who have volunteered their time and tireless efforts to advance these critical subject areas. We eagerly anticipate the outcomes stemming from these policies and the commission's involvement in the monitoring and the implementation of the action plans. We look forward to these plans serving as the country's guide to addressing the diverse needs of our vibrant youth and sports communities.

Mr. Speaker, let me now, as you permit me, to highlight a significant undertaking by the Ministry; the initiation of a heritage campaign driven by a singular goal to understand and appreciate the historical roots, traditions and legacies [of] Caymanian heritage. We recognise that our heritage is not just a collection of artefacts, it is a living and breathing essence that shapes

our collective identity, Mr. Speaker. Therefore, our aim is to ensure its enduring legacy for both present and future generations. This includes the approval necessary by the Government to identify the national dish, dress, dance, dessert and drink.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, my colleagues and members of the public would be aware of the recent announcement of the Cabinet approval for recognition and reinstatement of Emancipation Day. This will be a public holiday to be observed on the first Monday in May, beginning in 2024, and will replace the Discovery Day holiday. This decision is rooted in a two-year long process of research, discussions, historical reviews and collection of data in an effort to acknowledge this critical part of Cayman's past.

Mr. Speaker, the reinstatement of Emancipation Day in May is a pivotal move honouring our unique history and fostering national pride. Historical records reveal vibrant celebrations in Bodden Town well into the 20th century. Yet many are unaware of this vital aspect of our heritage. It is imperative not to forget this missing piece of our history as the removal of Emancipation Day suggests a rewriting of Cayman's history and undermines our heritage and where we have come from.

In tandem with Emancipation Day, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will reshape District Heritage Days, giving them dedicated time, more affiliated with other heritage activities and events. Such endeavours align perfectly with the Ministry's purpose which is to preserve our past and strengthen our future.

Other accomplishments under the area of culture and heritage included working alongside event organisers to craft authentic activities that resonate with our Caymanian heritage, including incorporating more local artisans in private sector events.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry developed an operational framework to guide one of our major national events, National Heroes Day. This involved initiating a multidisciplinary approach and discussion for developing the initiation and management of the nomination process, managing the National Heroes' Day Committee, and the development and communication aspects of the nomination period.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry also offered the support to an initial restoration of the S.V. Fair Weather, a vessel which was built in shipyards in Cayman Brac and Jamaica and is believed to be the final wooden schooner constructed by the Cayman Boats Ltd. The schooner is not only the last known to be built but also the last known ship capable of sailing. This restoration process has also offered apprenticeship opportunities, at this time, to four young Caymanian men from Cayman Brac and Grand Cayman to be part of this process. Building, learning and developing the skills of our forefathers in what was a significant part of where we came from as an industry. Upon the completion of the resto-

ration, we look forward to the S.V. Fair Weather returning home to our beloved Isles in celebration of our seafaring and shipbuilding heritage.

Mr. Speaker, our Ministry and its entities are known for its dynamic and impactful initiatives. We have successfully organised a variety of significant events such as the Caymanian Proud panel discussions, Cayman Christmas events, Pirates Week, Songs in the Park, Family District Fun Days, as well as the inaugural Youth Empowerment Symposium, and Proud of Them, in collaboration with the Youth Services Unit.

Additionally, we have engaged ongoing programming, summer camps and various intergenerational activities through the Ministry's departments and statutory organisations showcasing our commitment to fostering committed connections with our young people and older persons.

A major highlight for this month is the Christmas Choir Competition which involves individuals of all ages to participate in a family friendly event with enticing prizes. Last year's inaugural event took place in West Bay's Heritage Park, and this year, I am excited to bring it to my constituent district of East End.

Other noteworthy milestones include the opening of two new facilities, the Intergenerational Hub, MacLendon Drive in George Town, which has already become a centre of activity. The Hub provides for opportunities for public-private partnerships for activities which can include our young and older persons in recreational activities such as thatch rope making and physical and strengthening exercises. This facility allows for a host of other experiences which will allow for storytelling across generations and knowledge sharing of our history between older and young people.

I am pleased to report that we are now eagerly anticipating the opening of our upcoming satellite museum, the Cayman Collection Centre, this coming Friday, December 15th, between hours of 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. Mr. Speaker, I hope that you will allow us a break to go down for that opening as we consider this very important in our history, Sir.

This exciting venture is a partnership with the Cayman Islands National Museum and will be located at the former Motor Museum in West Bay. The Cayman Collection Centre will open with a display of previously unseen artefacts held and stored by the National Museum and will provide a new view of historical artefacts. Again, Sir, we trust you and the Members of this House to make the effort to immerse yourselves in all that these two facilities have to offer.

The Ministry continued to actively support individuals and organisations through its grants process. In order to ensure strategic alignment with the Ministry's priorities and the overarching outcomes that matters most for the Government, a dedicated Grant Review Committee was established which evaluated funding proposals from for all of our subject areas. This was to ensure that financial support was directed towards initiatives that closely resonated with the Ministry's vision

and could contribute meaningfully to our shared objectives. We look forward to continuing this support in the new budget cycle as well, Mr. Speaker.

Much of these activities are incorporated in the 2024 budget and our Ministry continues to strive for so much more with particular focus on enhancing these activities across the Cayman Islands. I know for certain, I am excited about more initiatives in the eastern districts, especially in the district of East End. A mission that is close to my heart as a representative for the district of East End.

Before delving into the proposed plans and projects for the upcoming 2024/2025 budget, there are some initiatives not mentioned earlier that are ongoing. These include:

- The review of the National Culture and Heritage Policy 2017-2026 to ensure that any key objectives can be achieved and facilitate ongoing review and planning for future consultations;
- Restoration of the Pink House right behind the Royal Bank Cayman to be established as a heritage site for display of artefacts;
- Development of historical and cultural relevant publications and campaigns for the Cayman Islands; and
- Establishment of a new aquatic centre for the Cayman Islands.

I would like to take a moment now to extend my heartfelt thanks and deep gratitude to the former Minister of Youth, Sports, Culture and Heritage, Parliamentary Secretary, Bernie Bush for his invaluable contributions during his tenure as Minister with this Ministry. The former Minister assumed leadership of this Ministry with a plan, addressing pressing concerns and promoting essential changes to propel the realms of youth, sports, culture and heritage to the forefront. He played a pivotal role within the team and the dedication he exhibited was nothing short of extraordinary.

The Ministry staff rallied behind him with an unparalleled commitment to their respective subject areas and a shared clear vision for progress. The numerous events initiatives undertaken over the last budget cycle speaks for itself. I must also commend the former Minister for his vision that have laid the foundation for the transformative journey we are about to embark upon in the next two fiscal years. It is through his leadership and the dedication of the Ministry staff that we find ourselves poised for the next phase of this budget cycle. Having had the privilege of serving under this Ministry as a Parliamentary Secretary, I personally witnessed the tireless efforts invested in shaping this trajectory.

Mr. Speaker, turning now to the specific focus areas and proposed capital projects for the—

The Speaker: Honourable Minister.

Before you turn there, would this be a convenient moment to take the evening suspension?

Hon. Isaac D. Rankine: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The House is now suspended.
We will return at 6.30 p.m.

Proceedings suspended at 6.05 p.m.

Proceedings resumed at 6.38 p.m.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

The Minister of Youth, Sports, and Heritage to continue his contribution.

Hon. Isaac D. Rankine: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just before we took the break, I was about to speak on some specific focus areas in our proposed capital projects for the 2024 budget.

I am pleased to share we are making progress with plans for the development of the new aquatic centre for the Cayman Islands. The location has now been identified and we have worked to secure this location. Reviews of products and vendors are on the way and we are certainly pleased with the progress at this time. This has been a project long in planning and we are pleased with the progress we have made over the last two weeks to make it a reality for the people of the Cayman Islands.

In addition, the facilities upgrade at the East End Football Field - the drawings and plans and the business case development are progressing and works are expected to begin in early 2024.

The Ministry is also set to undertake a comprehensive review and implementation of the National Sports Policy and the National Youth Policy. This process will involve extensive public engagement and input closely monitored by their respective commissions and the Ministry. These will be long-term plans in line with international best practices and span across a number of years seeking engagement and implementation from stakeholders to ensure success regardless of any administrative changes or developments.

The Ministry remains committed to optimising the grant process that provides funding for youth, sports, and heritage. Our aim is to ensure that various organisations and public initiatives receive warranted support while delivering optimum value, tangible benefits and outcomes to all of our people.

The focus of the National Identity Initiative, which I touched on earlier is to educate the public about authentic Caymanian customs and traditions, especially those of early Caymanians. It encourages feedback during educational engagement and makes the public consider and appreciate our heritage and traditions. This emphasis is crucial, as the Ministry is dedicated to prioritising increased awareness and preservation of our rich heritage in all aspects.

In early 2024, we will also be issuing two publications which are inherently focused on ensuring our past is preserved. For that, we are grateful for our local

creatives who have brought our visions to life and we look forward to finalising these projects and bringing them to the public. There will also be ongoing enhancements and further support to various annual events in ways that will clearly demonstrate our Caymanian heritage and not only reach the audience of older persons but also our younger persons who we are relying on to carry on these customs and traditions.

The Ministry is actively bolstering its online and community presence by elevating the visibility of its events and initiatives through diverse mediums. This includes our websites, social media platforms, radio appearances and occasional town hall meetings to connect more effectively with the public on upcoming campaigns.

Various operating expenditures from our departments and SAGCs have been included in this budget. This encompasses a wide range of initiatives including sports and youth programmes and services from the departments. Our SAGCs continue to provide outreach opportunities, create exhibitions and showcase art collections.

Additionally, the budget covers programming, training and support for artisans and creatives. It also ensures maintenance of facilities for ongoing productions and events.

Lastly, there is the conservation and preservation efforts of our national artefacts.

Mr. Speaker, while this is just a glimpse of what the Ministry will be continuing to do, in addition, I want to mention new proposed projects that we are aiming to establish and implement for this upcoming budget year:

- Upgrade key facilities for sports which we were unable to undertake in the previous two years.
- Public awareness and education on Caymanian heritage in partnership with key stakeholders through broad campaigns.
- New grant funding opportunities to align with the National Identity Initiative,
- Finalise National Youth and Sports Policies to be approved and tabled in Parliament in the best interest of our Cayman Islands that will look at the current issues, but plan for the growth and needs of our nation.
- Development of new cultural heritage, programming and activities to engage our young people and seniors at the Intergenerational Hub and the Cayman Collection Centre.

While my passion extends to every subject within the portfolio of which I hold responsibility, I want to briefly address the transition of the culture subject from our Ministry.

We as a Ministry acknowledge and understand that culture and heritage share a very symbiotic relationship that defines our identity. I invite both this

honourable House and the public to join me in embracing this change as an opportunity to magnify the celebration of our culture and heritage, now spanning across multiple portfolios.

This shift presents a unique opportunity to double our efforts and it is in an inviting prospect. As some of us are aware, we have encountered instances where both the public and even tourists have raised questions about our traditions, customs and even our identity. It is our goal to utilise this move to address our identity more comprehensively, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation by shaping the essence of who we are together.

I now turn to addressing capital funding which is crucial for the sustained enhancement of our public spaces. In the proposed budget, we are seeking approximately \$4 million in 2024 and \$2.8 million in 2025 for equity investments.

This funding is pivotal for the preservation of historical buildings and renovation of facilities which house our diverse artistic collection, as well as the improvement and renovations of several significant sites. This will not only enhance the physical infrastructure but also contribute to the overall experience for residents and visitors to our facilities.

As previously highlighted, this serves as only an overview, acknowledging the multitude of proposed projects and programmes the Ministry will embark on. Every task budgeted will bring benefit to the people of our country, and as we approach a busy yet fulfilling budget cycle, I am confident in the efficacy of our plans and our team in implementing positive outcomes for these Islands.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this time again to remind my constituents on some important initiatives for East End which are happening in collaboration with my colleagues. This again, as previously mentioned, the upgrades to the Donovan Rankine Field which will include the bathroom, changing rooms and the general field; the coastal works application which is still on track for the development of the beach in East End and Colliers; and the progression of the senior citizen home which my Colleague, the deputy Premier and the Minister for Social Development will mention in his budget contribution.

As I begin my close, I want to state that the budget presented today—or that would be last week, Friday—not only reflects my personal commitment but also underscores the dedication of the entire Government and the collective efforts of the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Heritage. Success in these endeavours is a shared responsibility that requires active participation from all; this honourable House, the various Ministries, the public and myself.

I want to extend my deepest appreciation to Chief Officer, Ms. Teresa Echenique, our dedicated deputy chief officers, the finance team, the director of editors and all of the individuals within our Ministry and affiliated entities. Sincere thanks to my colleagues in

this honourable House for their unwavering support to this Ministry. I anticipate our continued unity as we work together to preserve our past and strengthen our future. In my role as Minister for this extraordinary Ministry, I look forward to working together and continuing our important mission to serve for the benefit of our Caymanian people and our beloved Cayman Islands.

The good book of Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 shares similar sentiments of teamwork and working together and states: **“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour: If either of them falls down, one can have the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?”**

[Inaudible interjection]

[Laughter]

Hon. Isaac D. Rankine: “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

Finally, Mr. Speaker, as we head into the Christmas season, I pray that we will all make an extra effort to incorporate Caymanian traditions and activities into our festivities.

Many of us have wonderful memories of our childhood when we saw families and neighbours preparing beef or pork from recipes handed down from generation to generation. Our mothers and aunts baking with the smell of brown sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, coconut milk and grated cassava. Also, all of our important traditions of attending Christmas service. As a Christian community our faith is something we embrace year round, but especially at Christmas time.

Our traditions hold profound significance in shaping our identity, connecting us to our roots and providing a sense of belonging. It is my hope this holiday season, that our parents and grandparents across these Islands, will share their experiences, customs traditions and our values with our younger generation.

Mr. Speaker, I look forward to enjoying our Caymanian traditions this Christmas with my people in East End— so I support every action you take to end this session earlier, Sir— and others as I visit the other districts. I want to wish my colleagues in this honourable House, every one of my constituents, our civil servants, every Caymanian and resident, a memorable Christmas and a united, prosperous and blessed New Year. There is so much to be thankful for, Mr. Speaker.

God bless this Parliament and God bless these wonderful Cayman Islands. Thank you, Sir.

[Desk thumping]

The Speaker: Thank you, Minister.

I thought you were going to say, ‘two heads are better than one’, because East Enders say, ‘two heads

are better than one, even if it is only two old cow heads, because it got more meat.’

[Laughter]

The Speaker: The Minister of Border Control & Labour, and Culture.

[Pause]

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour, Minister of Border Control & Labour and Culture, Elected Member for Bodden Town East: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I proudly present the Ministry of Border Control, Labour and Culture’s priorities and objectives for the 2024/2025 budget cycle. Before I do so, I would like to thank the Almighty Father for giving me the strength and wisdom to debate on this budget. I want to thank Madam Premier and her vision and tenacity to get us here to this point where we could do so. I want to thank the team in itself for their perseverance and dedication, even through difficult circumstances they managed to recognise that country is first. I listened intently tonight and throughout the day to all of the presentations and I recognise that everyone wants me to speak for two hours or maybe not.

[Laughter]

The Speaker: There is no such requirement, sir.

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour: Mr. Speaker, the Ministry plays a pivotal role in safeguarding the Cayman Islands’ security, fostering economic growth and protecting the rights and well-being of our workforce through our diverse departments and services.

We strive to create an environment that promotes prosperity, stability and opportunity for all. This Ministry, through the departments of Customs & Border Control (CBC) and WORC is responsible for collecting over one-third of the Government’s revenue. This level of revenue management is a massive undertaking and I thank the Ministry and department leaders and all the staff members for their hard work on behalf of the Government and the people of the Cayman Islands.

Mr. Speaker, with the funding allocated in the 2024/2025 budget document, we will continue to invest in technology making more of our services available online including expansion of online payments, allowing our teams to meet the growing demand for services without having to grow the number of employees at the same pace as economic growth.

We are at a pivotal moment where technological advancements will continue significantly enhancing our capabilities to manage borders and labour more efficiently and effectively. We will streamline our processes by integrating cutting edge technologies such as artificial intelligence, biometric scanning and advanced data analytics. Technology will ensure quicker, more secure border management and effective labour

market oversight. This boosts our national security and significantly improves the user experience for both Caymanians and visitors alike.

I look forward with interest to the capital works done with the airport post office with the installation of solar panels. Leveraging solar energy in our Government buildings means substantial energy cost savings, environmental stewardship and a positive sustainable example for our community.

The Ministry team or my right hand, they provide expert policy advice and guidance on various policy matters including security, border control, labour management, and pension regulation. They work to develop and implement policies that align with my vision and the Government's priorities for a secure, prosperous and inclusive Cayman Islands.

As we look at the work of the Cayman Islands Customs and Border Control services, I want to take a few moments to recognise the remarkable dedication and unwavering commitment of an all-Caymanian leadership team of the department led by the well regarded Director, Mr. Charles Clifford, MBE, JP. I will take this moment, to recognise the remarkable dedication, and so deserving as one of the main revenue earners for the Cayman Islands Government. Mr. Clifford's unwavering leadership and vision have steered the service through a successful merger and other challenging times ensuring the safety and security of our borders while facilitating the smooth flow of legitimate goods and people.

The Deputy Directors, each a pillar of strength and expertise in their own right have provided invaluable support and guidance, ensuring every aspect of the CBC operates efficiently and excellently. The Director Designate, Mr. Bruce Smith leads the charge on an intelligence-driven approach to securing our borders, overseeing the Sister Islands operation as well as the Intelligence Unit and the investigation sections. Mr. Smith was successful in a recent open recruitment exercise and will be taking over the leadership at CBC when Director Clifford retires midway through 2024. Director Clifford and Director Designate Smith have developed a leadership transition plan which will ensure a very smooth transfer of the leadership of CBC in 2024.

Deputy Director Kevin Walton's commitment to trade and revenue is evident in his and his team's work. He is primarily known for his work in leading the development of world-class home-grown information technology systems, known as the Customs Information Management System and the Customs Online System which allows the CBC to offer exceptional service to its clients, from the very large importers, to individual importers who now have access to a fully online experience including online payments. The change process supports CBC's intermediate and long-term trade and revenue objectives with streamlined processes. The technology facilitates, among other things, import and export processing, pre-arrival and departure cargo in-

formation, revenue collection with online payment capacity, concession and temporary import management, trade management, financial reporting capabilities and risk analysis.

The strategic aim for 2024-2025 is to continue the development of CBC's online offering to include, among other things, the enhancement of services to the travel sector while preserving the integrity of our intelligence-led risk management methodology.

Mr. Speaker, Deputy Director Garfield Wong's unwavering focus has been on port operations, visa and migration management. He and his team have been working tirelessly to process the asylum claims of 433 irregular migrants who arrived between 2022 and 2023 and they have returned 126 of them, mostly in 2023, to their homeland after their claims were refused. Many other migrants have since illegally departed Cayman since seeking refuge in other countries.

Mr. Speaker, the Deputy Director Marlon Bodden's dedication is also evident as he works tirelessly to train new CBC officers in all aspects of CBC's operations. He is responsible for CBC's Management Support Services Portfolio which includes internal information technology (IT) tech support, human resources, and the critical anti-money laundering (AML) and professional standards unit.

Deputy Director Bodden's work in the AML sphere, in collaboration with our domestic regional and international partners, is crucial to ensuring that the Cayman Islands Government's revenue is protected from the threat or risk of trade-based money laundering. Mr. Bodden successfully led CBC's contribution to the overall CIG strategy to address the FATF and CFATF related challenges which ultimately resulted in the Cayman Islands being removed from the grey list.

Mr. Speaker, Head of Finance, Ms. Camile Beckford Johnson and her talented finance team are responsible for accounting, and securing approximately \$300 million in revenue annually, which is vital revenue that allows this Government to fund the priority areas that our Caymanians expect and demand. It is critical to note that as of November 2023, CBC has earned approximately \$290 million; \$219 [million] recorded as actual revenue and approximately \$71 million as foregone revenues due to concessions, waivers and exemptions granted by the Government.

The Finance Portfolio also manages CBC's newest facility to the public, the online payment [system], which was launched in November 2023, and this has resulted in a significant reduction in foot traffic in CBC's cargo processing hall.

Mr. Speaker, for the year to date, CBC has processed a total of 1,096,727 passengers through the international airports. That total includes 545,219 incoming and 549,508 outgoing passengers from January to October of this year. CBC's team working at the seaport processed over 899,000 tons of cargo, containerised cement and aggregates, and a total of 2,248,049 cruise passengers. That total includes 1,124,956 incoming

and 1,123,093 outgoing cruise passengers. The trade and revenue team processed 182,751 declarations this calendar year. CBC intercepted 62 drug shipments to date, including interceptions of this very dangerous drug fentanyl. CBC officers stopped nine illegal firearms and 610 rounds of ammunition from entering the Cayman Islands. The dedicated CBC officers effected 88 arrests this year to date.

Mr. Speaker, it is also important that efforts placed on fostering a collaborative interagency culture is recognised. This has culminated in numerous CBC and RCIPS joint intelligence-led post-importation operations which have also yielded remarkable results.

Mr. Speaker, each Member of this talented CBC senior leadership team utilises their unique skill, expertise and resolute passion for serving our Islands as they continue to develop skilled and competent officers, grooming them for more senior leadership positions. I look forward to their continued leadership in ensuring the safety, security and prosperity of the Cayman Islands for generations to come.

Workforce Opportunities and Residency Cayman

Mr. Speaker, focusing now on the Department of Workforce Opportunities and Residency Cayman. Director Jeremy Scott and his all-Caymanian leadership team are doing some fantastic work. The amount of work the Department processes is astonishing. Since January 1st of this year, the Department has received over 52,000 applications for work permits and residency in Cayman. Mr. Scott and his team have processed over 51,000 during the same period. Well done.

Mr. Speaker, delivering on the opportunities in WORC, Deputy Director for Labour Needs & Supply Sian Pairaudeau, and her team have trained a total of 305 Caymanians this year and have successfully placed 126 Caymanians into employment, helping to drive Caymanian unemployment to the lowest percentage in decades.

Further, Mr. Speaker, the Employment Services Unit at WORC engaged with our Caymanians who have barriers to employment by the partnering with private sector partners, government Departments and Ministries to develop and deliver interventions that help prepare Caymanians for the workplace. One such example, Mr. Speaker, is through the partnership with the Education Ministry's Early Childhood Assistance Programme (ECAP). Assistance is provided to many Caymanian single parents who are able to obtain critical training or start working without having to worry about care of their children.

Mr. Speaker, the service delivered at WORC is improving and the "happy or not" score shows this to be a fact. One of the driving forces behind these improvements is Ms. Allison Lovinggood, Deputy Director of Business Operations. Ms. Lovinggood and her customer care team answered 56,116 calls to date; an average of 4,759 per day while processing a whopping

79,500 walk-in customers, an average of 331 per day. Well done, team!

Mr. Speaker, as you can see, when persons complain about WORC, they are actually working.

Mr. Speaker, the Deputy Director, Mr. Mervin Manderson and his team of compliance officers are doing a fantastic job investigating immigration law infractions, conducting high visibility workplace checks and marriage checks. Mr. Manderson and his team regularly work hand-in-hand with other law enforcement agencies such as RCIPS, the CBC, Department of Labour and Pensions, and the Department of Commerce in joint operations ensuring Caymanians' job opportunities are protected.

WORC's Head of Finance, Mr. Thoywell Facey and his team are responsible for collecting and accounting for over \$120 million in revenue this calendar year. This, Mr. Speaker, reflects a year-to-date surplus over the budgeted forecast of \$29 million. As you will note, Mr. Speaker, through these collaborative efforts of my Ministry's senior leadership team, this Ministry positively contributes to the Government's revenue allowing this Government to deliver programmes and services for Caymanians—that's why when we ask for staff in the budget, you know, we should get it.

Mr. Speaker, I want to offer public thanks to my colleague whose support allowed me to confirm the appointment of all immigration boards last week. I want to thank those who previously served on boards, and welcome the new chairpersons, deputies and members to their respective boards. These boards will work in a balanced approach within the confines of our immigration laws as they go about their important roles in protecting Caymanians while at the same time, ensuring businesses have the labour necessary to be successful, as well as expertly consider applications for residency and Caymanian status.

Department of Labour and Pensions

Over at the Department of Labour and Pensions, Mr. Speaker, Director Bennard Ebanks and his all Caymanian senior leadership team have also been very busy enforcing our labour and pensions laws and supporting the work of the Labour Appeals Tribunal and the National Pensions Board.

Most recently, Mr. Speaker, Deputy Director for Pensions, Ms. Amy Wolliston utilised her technical skills to support the drafting, passage and implementation of the National Pensions (Amendment) Act, 2023. It was gazetted and commenced on December 9th. Our Caymanians can now apply to withdraw increased amounts from their pension to pay off mortgages, purchase property or pay down mortgages and the associated arrears on strata fees.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, the pensions team conducted 483 investigations, processed 416 applications for pension withdrawals and prosecuted 45 pension offences.

On the labour side of the Department, the Deputy Director Mrs. J. Loyal Christian-Linwood and her team investigated, mediated or referred a total of 1,025 labour cases, conducted 183 on-site inspections of labour documentation, and referred 35 cases to the office of the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP).

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, you may recall that on 27 April, 2023 through a motion moved by the Member for West Bay West, the Hon. McKeeva Bush, Parliament accepted that a gratuity task force be established. As a result, a review of the gratuities regime was conducted and a report will soon be submitted for Cabinet's consideration.

Head of Inspections, Mr. Gene Hydes and his team worked to support the labour unit and focused on occupational health and safety measures. They conducted 59 on-site safety inspections including several serious workplace injury cases.

Mr. Speaker, the Assistant Director, Ms. Leticia Goring provided dedicated, responsive and efficient administrative support to the Minimum Wage Advisory Committee alongside her other administrative and finance department duties. She and her team provided professional and timely administrative services to the Labour Tribunal and the Labour Appeals Tribunal.

Mr. Speaker, it is my distinct pleasure to work with the Chief Officer, Mr. Wesley Howell; his Deputy Chief Officers Ms. Debbie Ann Whitaker and Ms. Danielle Roberts, and the entire Ministry team. They make my work as Minister manageable. Chief Officer Howell is respected by his colleagues and especially by his team as a calm, experienced, skilled and dedicated Chief Officer. He leads his team to excellence.

Mr. Speaker, Deputy Chief Officers Debbie Ann Whittaker and Danielle Roberts [are] significant forces in the Ministry. Together with their team members, Jason, Justin, Rolna and Tina, they deliver a range of critical responsibilities including policy development, legal reform and the implementation of efficient solutions to complex issues while also addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by global migration trends. Their efforts contribute significantly to maintaining the economic stability and security of the Cayman Islands.

Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Mr. Vinton Chinsee has earned my respect for his accounting knowledge and his fantastic team's work year after year to ensure that the Ministry's accounts are completed on time and receive a clean audit opinion. Thank you to this strong finance team which includes Lynette, Melantha, Kiria, Elorine, Crystal, and Jordan.

Mr. Speaker, Chief Human Resources (HR) Manager, Ms. Briana Ebanks deserves credit for her work and drive, and support [of] the hiring and promotion of Caymanian employees. She is a massive supporter of the Deputy Governor's Employee of the Month Programme and has not missed a submission since the Programme was implemented. I can attest to the work of the leadership on her HR team: Ms. Sharon, Brittany

and Allyson, they work hard to ensure every staff member feels respected and appreciated; and I can attest to that Mr. Speaker.

Communication Manager, her tireless efforts have kept the public informed on various complex issues like labour rights, pensions, border control, migration and immigration. Ms. Martha Connolly offers valuable assistance to me in preparing speaking notes, managing campaigns and turning my vision into reality through compelling visual graphics.

Mr. Speaker, my Personal Assistant (PA) Ms. Liz Smith is an unsung heroine. She works behind the scenes organising, facilitating and anticipating needs, [and] keeps me coordinated with professionalism that appears effortless.

Mr. Speaker, the small but dedicated team in the Ministry works tirelessly to implement policies and support the critical work of the Departments that fall under the Ministry, in making the Cayman Islands safer and better for Caymanians, and those who visit and work alongside our people.

Mr. Speaker, please indulge me as I now share the important work of my Departments. Before I move on, Mr. Speaker, I just want to say that not many persons got up and mentioned every one of their department heads' names or Ministry's *[sic]* names and so forth.

Mr. Speaker, this Department, a Cayman-ised department, deserves recognition and ought to be called out publicly, and I was proud to do so. The old adage of Caymanians are lazy, old comments that Caymanians don't have the experience, Mr. Speaker, Caymanians are running one of the largest departments in Government; collecting a third of Government's revenue and this ought to be recognised that Caymanians...

[Desk thumping]

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour: That's the reason why I called them by name, because we need to start... Instead of listening to some of those radio blogs that are putting Caymanians down, this is my effort to try to turn that around and call our Caymanians by name who are doing a great job in this country. Unsung heroes some of them, but you don't hear about this. You hear about the negative things; that people are benefiting and buying BMWs and [Mercedes] Benz and laughing about it that they have made someone's life uncomfortable, made a child uncomfortable, right?

An Hon. Member: True.

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour: This is the kind of thing that we have come to? We must shut it down. They've said enough about me, they can't say any more. They're just on repeat now, you know, a 10 year repeat; they got beaten and they're hurt.

Mr. Speaker, the Department of Labour and Pensions is committed to upholding employees and employers' dignity and rights. We provide comprehensive training and education in labour laws, occupational safety regulations, and national pension schemes ensuring all stakeholders are well informed and compliant.

Mr. Speaker, in the upcoming year, we are turning our attention to the Minimum Wage Report. We would like to publicly thank Mr. Lemuel Hurlston and his committee for the hard work that they have done on analysing and consulting on our minimum wage amounts. As you know, Mr. Speaker, we are striving to strike a balance by considering the many factors to ensure economic harmony and social welfare.

Firstly, the cost of living is crucial as the minimum wage should enable workers to meet basic needs like food, housing and health care. The local economic conditions including unemployment rates and the health of various industries also plays a significant role. It's essential to consider the impact of employment as excessively high rates may lead to job losses and can be financially crippling to our Caymanians, particularly to those who employ domestic workers.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to say one thing. I presented the Minimum Wage Report for Caucus to review and I must tell you it's a very comprehensive report. I really appreciate the work that the Minimum Wage Committee has done.

What we as this Government are not prepared to do, is to make mistakes such as was done—I hate to say it—in 2015, not necessarily a mistake, but no one saw it coming, I guess, I should say that. What we must be cognisant of is that the persons who will benefit from the minimum wage uplift, we have 77 per cent of transient workers who would benefit from the minimum wage report and only 23 per cent of Caymanians that are in that bracket. That is something very notable to mention.

When we are doing our assessment as to where we take that, we also need to take stock and revisit 2015 as to the effects that it had on the economy, on our people, on Caymanians because we can't go and make these decisions and then it impacts our people, and our cost of living for our people becomes worse. What happened back in 2015 was an unforeseen circumstance in terms of persons in one sector of our economy who were imported workers, their salary doubled, in essence, and caused havoc and our Caymanians' salary remained stagnant.

Now, that's mostly and mainly in the private sector. Most of our Caymanians make above minimum wage. What, in essence, I think the Committee is saying is that even if we increased it to the top number of the recommended minimum wage, that they recommended, only 23 per cent of Caymanians who are on minimum wage would benefit from it. It's something very serious to pay attention to because we can really make a mistake if we don't find a way to sectorise it,

that it doesn't fully impact our Caymanian people whose salaries remain stagnant while salaries go up for services and persons who they need in their life to make their life work and remain comfortable, causing additional pressures on our Caymanians.

I am trying to be very sensitive with that conversation because obviously it's not complete in terms of the Caucus and Cabinet and we want to take another look at it again with our stakeholders and also some of the Opposition Members to really look at it and make a good, informed decision. Bringing in the right people to try to help us because if we make the wrong decision with this, it can really cripple certain elements of our industry.

I say that with all respect and I don't think that anyone will say that persons don't need an uplift in any industry, but we need to recognise what it is and where we are at and what economy we're living in. I'll leave it at that and you'll hear more from us at a later date early in the New Year in terms of the minimum wage.

However, I think we need to have another conversation as to how can we then—Caymanians who are above the minimum wage, who have been stagnant for many years—help them get the necessary uplift that they need and cost of living adjustments that are outside Government itself in the private sector. That's another conversation to have.

Mr. Speaker, we will be moving on national pensions as well. The Department of Labour and Pensions will commission actuarial studies of the health of all national pension plans, and armed with that report and with the recommendation from the National Pensions Board, we can move ahead with the Select Committee in this House.

Mr. Speaker, we also plan to bring amendments to the Investment Regulations and further amendments to the National Pensions Act.

As a Government Minister with constitutional responsibility for pensions, I affirm that a robust National Pension System is foundational to our nation's wellbeing. It ensures financial security in retirement, helps to bring dignity to our elders in their golden years, and symbolises a compassionate, forward-thinking society. Together we build a secure future for our people.

In addition, the Department of Labour and Pensions actively resolves individual disputes, enforces labour and pension laws, and conducts thorough investigations and inspections to address our non-compliance. We are committed to ensuring fair and equitable labour for all Caymanians.

Customs and Border Control

The Customs and Border Control service is the front line guardian of our borders, safeguarding our nation against illegal activities while facilitating legitimate trade and travel. We meticulously process air and marine craft, passengers and cargo, ensuring compliance

with the Customs and Border Control Act, Regulations, other relevant legislation and international conventions.

CBC has played a crucial role, Mr. Speaker, in identifying, investigating and arresting offenders, employing advanced detection methods and collaborating closely with law enforcement agencies locally and internationally to protect our communities.

Mr. Speaker, the foundation of CBC's Five-Year Strategy Plan is transitioning from the traditional gatekeeper approach to an intelligence-led risk management organisation. Since CBC was formed in 2019, they have made significant progress with this transition which is facilitated by and among other things: relevant training, advanced technology and equipment; incorporating risk profiles in our operation, and enhanced digital connectivity with our partner law enforcement agencies.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to say this, and I'm and nearing the end, when I was first made Minister of Border Control, I visited Director Clifford's office and he had all of his directors and managers and everyone in the same room for a meeting. He was explaining to me the hierarchy and the role of each officer and the processes that he had put in place, and for me—and I can't say nowhere else has a plan like he had—I have never seen a succession plan in any other department—and this is only my experience and forgive me, anyone else who has a great one. I have never seen a succession plan for Caymanians like Director Clifford. He can rightly so retire with the succession plan that he has in place in every department. It is amazing. I wish some people could experience that one day and learn what he has there. I am proud of that team.

CBC continues to confront and manage the challenges associated with asylum seekers; while this is a problem that many countries in the Caribbean, North America, Europe and elsewhere are grappling with, we are ever mindful of the need for enhanced infrastructure and resources to effectively manage the security risk associated with it in Cayman. While we are no longer in crisis with this matter, we also know from experience that we can go from where we are now to the crisis point in fairly short order. Thus, Mr. Speaker, we must prepare as best as possible and not be content with a reactive approach to asylum related challenges.

On the capital development side, the ageing CBC transit shed warehouse on Owen Roberts Drive requires significant repairs or a complete replacement. We have provided funding in 2024/2025 CapEx budget to progress this work.

Cayman Islands Postal Service

In January 2024, the Cayman Islands Postal Service will move under this Ministry's portfolio and go beyond traditional mail delivery; offering diverse services that contribute to the Cayman Islands economic and social fabric. We provide revenue collection services for various government departments, facilitate the

issuance of official stamps and promote philatelic activities; fostering a sense of national identity and cultural heritage.

The Cayman Islands Postal Service is the first in the world to pilot a new technology called the Global Monitoring System and I was there in Jamaica, August to September this year and witnessed that accolade from the many countries around the region, US, UK and France. This system uses radio frequency identification to monitor and improve postal services. It will enhance the data gathered mechanisms and strengthen compliance with international security and border control requirements without increasing staffing levels. The post office also extends its services to support Government agencies, delivering essential documents and packages, ensuring the smooth functioning of various administrative processes.

Workforce Opportunities and Residency Cayman (WORC)

The Department of Workforce Opportunities and Residency Cayman is dedicated to maximising human capital and strengthening the Cayman Islands' global competitiveness. We process applications for work permits and residency ensuring that our workforce aligns with the skills and expertise required for sustainable economic growth. The WORC department also provides comprehensive employment services to Caymanians, assisting them in identifying job opportunities, acquiring necessary training and overcoming barriers to employment. We are committed to empowering Caymanians to reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to the nation's workforce.

I look forward to bringing legislation to this House in 2024 that will address many of our people's concerns with immigration; as you heard the Premier allude to, legislation to address various gaps and enhance certain aspects of the immigration framework. The critical areas of focus include revamping the Residency and Employment Right Certificate regime; reducing the number of persons qualifying for Permanent Residence (PR) and Caymanian Status by improving information sharing and strengthening compliance and enforcement; and enhancing the powers of the Caymanian Status and Permanent Residency Board.

These expected amendments aim to strike a balance between protecting the interests of Caymanians, promoting the employment of Caymanians and reducing Caymanians' underemployment while maintaining the attractiveness of the Cayman Islands as a destination for investment, innovation and skilled labour.

Culture and Art

As Minister of Culture, I am deeply committed to preserving and promoting our cultural traditions, ensuring they thrive and inspire future generations. The

Cayman Islands Government plays a central role in organising and supporting these cultural events, ensuring they are celebrated with the respect and recognition they deserve. By investing in our culture we invest in the identity and soul of our nation. The National Heroes' Day commemorated on the fourth Monday of January is a poignant reminder of the exceptional individuals who have significantly contributed to our nation's development. Their unwavering dedication to social progress, economic growth and cultural enrichment have paved the way for the Cayman Islands we know today.

The art scene in the Cayman Islands is flourishing with talented musicians, artists and performers captivating audiences with their creativity and passion. We support their endeavours; providing platforms to showcase their work and inspire others. The Pirates Week, a vibrant annual festival, is a testament to our maritime history and the adventurous spirit that has defined our Islands. Through mock pirate invasions, historical re-enactments and lively entertainment, we bring our past to life, reminding ourselves of the legacy of those who dared to venture into unknown.

The Cayman Government plays a significant role in funding and promoting Pirates Week. The Minister of Culture with the support of other government agencies who works closely with local businesses and organisations to plan and execute the various events and activities that make up the festival. Through collaborations with the Ministry of Tourism, we will market Pirates Week to the international community as a significant tourism event to make Pirates Week an immense success.

Our culture is not merely a collection of traditions and stories. It is a living, breathing entity that continues to evolve and shape our identity. It is a foundation upon which we build our future, guided by our ancestors' values and people's aspirations. I urge all Caymanians and transient persons to embrace our culture, cherish the traditions passed down through generations and celebrate the diversity that makes our Islands so unique. Together, let us continue to nurture and protect our cultural identity, ensuring it remains a beacon of pride and inspiration for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, I take great pride in being the Minister of Culture. This leads me to speak about our dying culture and heritage that needs a fighting chance. Our forefathers must be turning over in their graves to know the great relationships we have forged with many visitors, transient workers and children who attended the same school of transient workers who came here to help build this country and care for our children and the great relationships we still hold with them... Oh, how things have changed, where it appears like it is them against us, and the appearance that a professional transient worker can come and retire in a short period and our own Caymanian professionals have to work like a dog until they are dragging.

I want it to be known that I understand what I need to appreciate, and changes are coming. It won't

just be my plan, but our stakeholders also, and you, the people, so that we can continue growing prosperity; but prosperity must work for Caymanians. It can't just be one way. They can't just use us to get the lower work done, we need the upper echelon's jobs also. Mr. Speaker, I will dare to say, and I have not crossed this with the Caucus or Cabinet, but we need to get to the point where, if you are not contributing in this country to empower a Caymanian to rise up, then... I'll leave that part blank, because this must work for Caymanians.

All of us are from somewhere. Every one of us has got family from somewhere else. That's not the problem, the problem is you're here... Our people are really going through a difficult time and I will talk about that. Let me show you that I understand what is going on here and that I appreciate when people come here. Our seamen left these Islands in search of work and opportunities. We didn't have it, so they went in search of it, and the money they sent home was not Caymanian money, it was money from a foreign land. Stop me if I am wrong. We need to forever be grateful for that, as we built this country, and the women who stayed at home fed our children and schooled them, with inward investment from foreign lands. We must appreciate that. Thus, when we hear Caymanians make mention of, *who are we building for or too many people are here*, we need to appreciate that we have grown faster than any country in the world and it is not necessarily a bad problem but still stressful for those who call Cayman home.

Now, how do we do this? I don't fully know, but our people are asking us to slow things down and I agree with them because we are losing grip. As the majority of the minority it is very worrying, Mr. Speaker. We have seen where tourists have come here and are quite disappointed that they haven't met a local. No one should be proud of that. I had a tourist at a hotel about eight months ago who, once hearing I was a local Caymanian ran up to me and wanted to hear my accent—that's why I keep my accent and I am not changing it; too late now. Mr. Speaker, they were alarmed at how they had been on the island for five days and didn't meet a local and proceeded in a jovial manner to *touch me* to see if I was real. You know, I'm not saying that has anything to do with me being handsome, I didn't say that.

Mr. Speaker, the Tourism Minister, the Culture Minister, the Heritage Minister and the Permanent Secretaries need to work together and build on what is in place to create programmes and find a way to ensure persons arriving here meet a local, either on Cayman Airways, at the airport, or in their whereabouts of these lovely Islands. If you come here, please try to immerse yourself in the local community also. Drive out to East End, North Side, Bodden Town, West Bay, [visit] Cayman Brac and Little Cayman. We need you, you are here with us, we need you to help us.

I want to touch on companies and Caymanian employment. We have what I call a good problem, in

having more jobs than we have Caymanians. This brings its problem in itself, but we will ask for companies to do their civic duties to ensure our Caymanians get the necessary training, so that whichever Caymanians want to work, they can do so. The Government cannot do it alone and we need the private sector's partnership.

Pirates Week, Mr. Speaker, never again to be without Heritage Days. This is the most important time for tourists meeting our people and getting a taste of our culinary skills along with local commerce that it creates.

Mr. Speaker, we need to stop creating policies that penalise Caymanians for everything, anytime they are trying to make better of themselves. We penalise them for having family land, *Oh, you can't get no stamp duty because your father left you a piece of land when you were two years old, you didn't even know about it.* Stamp duty waivers, other exemptions in the interest of Caymanians at the Minister's purview.

We can't give everyone else a break and then we give our Caymanians a hard time. We need to recognise what we're doing to our people. I think just because it is there as a policy we think, *'Oh let's stick to this policy.'* We need to think about what we are doing to our people.

Bodden Town Projects

Mr. Speaker, this is my third term being elected and I can say this was my most challenging one. I want to thank you again for Bodden Town East. I am not saying that I am sugar and that I could be added to almost everything or anywhere, but I think you made the right choice in someone so resilient.

Mr. Speaker, some of the things that we have ongoing in Bodden Town:

- The Church of God Centre, which is a hurricane shelter;
- The Theoline McCoy Primary School's hall which is also a hurricane shelter;
- We bought the Theoline McCoy Primary School a new bus;
- We have one of the best boat ramps and boat docks in the country;
- We have mitigation measures in place in flooded areas, although we are still working at that in Belford and Cumber Avenue;
- We bought (not exposed to the public fully) six pieces of beach property in Bodden Town because that's the area where we now have beach, that's the next Seven Mile Beach;
- Roadworks; and
- Affordable housing.

Mr. Speaker, we have a pantry at our office. I'm glad people just come and donate, and persons come and they appreciate a bag of groceries that we can give

from my office in Bodden Town. I thank Ana and Imogene and the staff there.

Simple things such as a crosswalk, people don't understand how important it is. If you have got a 90 year old walking across, you would know the importance of it. Electronic speed limits throughout the district, people were speeding like anything. Now, we have got it up and I want to thank NRA and the team and Minister Jay for getting that up so quickly.

Some of the things I would love to see in Bodden Town are: increased police presence and beat; and not only driving across with the A/C but riding on motorbikes or bicycles. The area of concern is 500ft and you'll knock out 80 per cent of the crime.

Recognition of Bodden Town as the first capital and create a tourism product of the same. I've been begging for it.

I've spoken to the Minister also, regarding getting our own suction pump, a truck. Bodden Town has some of the most flooded areas and when the rainy times come, or hurricanes come, we have to wait for the truck to come. Meanwhile, persons are stuck in their houses and can't get out.

We also want our own grass cutter; we have the longest stretch of land. The people are seeing us and saying, *Bodden Town looking bad.* We need our own, we are too large, from Spotts Newlands to Teemas.

Mr. Speaker, I have spoken to the Premier about this and everyone knows my pet peeve on having at least 25 persons throughout each district employed on a year-long NiCE programme. It is no science, you don't need a Philadelphia lawyer to figure it out. It is going on right now in Cayman Brac for years. We already have a model. It can start tomorrow. We need a NiCE programme on steroids, keeping our district clean and assisting the elderly and our most vulnerable.

Coe Wood Beach needs a little upgrading, ensuring wheelchair accessibility and security.

[I want to] purchase an abandoned building that I identified and spoke to the Premier and the Lands Ministry about, we are in contact trying to find the owners. We can either use that for day care of seniors or after school care for our children. These are needed.

Mr. Speaker, I'm not coming off of it either, although it is not in the budget, we need to look at the recommendations of the outlined business case and that a hospital of smaller, condensed size needs to be placed in the middle of the Island. The land has been identified, 10 acres in Bodden Town as an emergency centre. We would really like that, not only for Bodden Town but for the country.

Additional affordable land or homes in Bodden Town. I have spoken to the Minister and they were aggressively seeking additional property to build more.

We need to encourage tourists, Mr. Speaker. George Town is full. You can't drive through, you can't get on Public Beach. You can't get on any West Bay beach. Bodden Town is the new West Bay. We need

commerce up at Bodden Town. We need to bring our district alive again. It used to be one of the most thriving districts with theatres and dance halls and everything else. We need some cruise tourists to come up there to lend some of their dollars to Bodden Town, creating more entrepreneurs and opportunities for persons in the eastern districts.

We must take our time and move further east. I must admit, the former minister Mr. Charles Clifford was correct. He was ahead of his time. We needed to go east. Mr. Speaker, I don't even want to mention too much on this, about how it is needed. People just need to look, because the skies were grey this morning.

I see people out there making assumptions about NRA. These guys are engineers, professionals, they model things, they are in constant contact with the international world and traveling and getting new ideas. Those guys know how to build connector roads after the East-West arterial has reached Prospect. They know how to do it. Do not underestimate our Caymanians. People have come here with their international ideas and underestimating our Caymanians; our trained Caymanians, our professional Caymanians. NRA is doing a fantastic job and they ought to be applauded. They know what they are doing, they know how to build a road, they know how to mitigate flooding and everything else.

Mr. Speaker...

[Heavy sigh]

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour: We need additional bus shelters and we also need interior neighbourhood transport. Buses who drop off these passengers at the main road, it is ridiculous seeing people walk so long. We need to find a way, I know that they probably worked something out with Newlands or otherwise, but there are other roads. They are trying but they're not coming off of their route, so we need to do something about it. The Government is going to have to assist.

Wellness in our nation is big on my agenda and I would like to have some kind of reward wellness programme in every constituency, and once our district councils are up, it's something that they can continue running. What we need is to put great emphasis on wellness and exercise and everything else, you know, and the Ministers and Members of Parliament need to play a great part in it also. We cannot continue to stay unhealthy. We need to do our part also.

I just want to say that I fully support, outside of my area, jet ways, the Mental Health Facility and the ReGen project. I also support the idea of satellite NAU offices in each district. I also support bus warden's compensation during summer, Easter and winter down times and also litter wardens.

Mr. Speaker, I also support a Government discount store. Work has already been done and I'm going to continue to pounce on it because we need to understand that people need to pay a decent price for a bag

of goods. Some of these things are duty free and they are paying high sky blue.

Where is our Sargassum plan? I haven't seen it. They have been working on it four or five years. Sargassum is still coming up 5ft in Bodden Town some-time. There are things you can do. You can't just be sitting ducks.

As mentioned earlier, housing repairs; we need housing repairs on steroids as well. Someone called me crying this morning, it was raining, and you know when it is raining you get those calls. Their house was dripping and they have children and so forth. You hate to hear these things, but we need to do our job the best we can to try to keep our Caymanians dry. The Deputy Premier is doing his best with the funding he has got; and the Minister of Planning and Housing, and public works is doing his best with his housing repairs also. Thus, we have to continue working on that because there are many people out there who are seeking assistance and haven't got it as yet. I know we're trying our best, but we need to know that there are more people out there.

Christmas Greetings

Mr. Speaker, whilst we are at Parliament until late in December, let me say Christmas is a time for family, for reflection, for friends. A time when we come together in unity as in the Christian faith of the Cayman Islands, we reflect on the reason for the season, that baby boy Jesus who has made a difference in our lives that we can be forgiven for our sins and give us that hope to see the pearly gates.

I pray safety on your families. I pray that you find it in your hearts to give a child a gift, a neighbour, a parent. To the people of Bodden Town East, I thank you again for this opportunity to be your MP. I pray you continue to see my value and diversity, to get things done for you. To all the people in the Cayman Islands: Have a Merry Christmas, one of joy and happiness.

To the Governor, the Deputy Governor, Attorney General, civil servants, Parliamentary Secretaries, Parliament staff, the Ministers; to our drivers for protocol, my Ministry of Border Control and Labour, WORC, Department of Labour & Pensions (DLP); and in 20 days, the Post Office, I thank you. To the Honourable Premier, to the Opposition, and [you,] Mr. Speaker, have a Merry Christmas.

Bodden Town East, I come to you on the 20th December for seniors and on the 23rd December for children. I pray that I see you in person at these events. You won't regret it. Have a Happy New Year.

This UPM can work, I think, under the leadership of Madam Premier Juliana O'Connor-Connolly. I thank you God, for bringing the team together. This is what we have. Let's work with what we have. Too many times people get things wrong because they forget that you need to work with what you have, and I think the sooner we can realise that, the better it is.

I want to say this before I leave though, Mr. Speaker. In my opinion, no one wants to steal, no one wants to rob, and no one wants to sell anything illegal in this country. They just want a chance to earn their keep and place food on their tables.

Only 40,000 Caymanians; think about it. A billion dollar budget. We must be able to make the prosperity of Cayman work for Caymanians. We need to grow and achieve the high prizes too. To the companies out there who are not giving our trained, university certified, degree-having Caymanians opportunities to move up the ladder, John John is watching you.

God bless these honourable Cayman Islands. I appreciate the spirit of the Opposition. I thank you all very much. Christmas falls on the 25th for you all, too.

[Laughter]

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour: And I know *unna* want to get into *unna* constituencies.

[Cross talk]

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour: I did my hour. God bless.

The Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Does any other Member wish to speak? [Pause]

The Member for Savannah.

[Pause]

Hon. Heather D. Bodden, Deputy Speaker, Elected Member for Savannah: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to offer my contribution to the Throne Speech and Budget Address and to speak briefly to the Appropriations Bill for financial years 2024/2025. As you mentioned, Mr. Speaker, “**brevity is the soul of wit**”, I shall be brief.

I take this opportunity to say heartfelt thanks to Her Excellency, Mrs. Jane Owen for encouraging words during her delivery of her first Throne Speech this past Friday. She's clearly all about unity and togetherness and has fit right in with all of us. She's welcomed at every event and makes herself right at home.

Beautification Task Force

In my contribution today, I would like to update Members and the listening public of the stellar work that has been undertaken to beautify all three of our Islands. It is work that is near and dear to my heart and is an area which I find particularly gratifying, subscribing, as I do, the principle that cleanliness is next to godliness.

As you are aware, Mr. Speaker, a Beautification Task Force (BTF) was established under the remit of the Ministry of Tourism and Ports which I represent as Parliamentary Secretary. I sincerely thank the Minister of Tourism for his full support and to his dedicated

staff: Perry, Lorna, Ashley, Mona and Gina. I sincerely thank them for their full support.

While the BTF does not have full time employees, the clean-up of our Islands, including the removal of derelict cars and eradication of all kinds of litter has been a central element in our focus. Since being elected two and a half years ago, I have been tasked with continuing the work I have been involved in all my life and that is to ensure that we live in a clean and healthy environment. It was not an uncommon sight years ago, especially at this time of year to see homes and gardens in our Islands, clean and tidy with white sand yards and blooming fruit trees and not a scrap of bulk waste in sight. Our roadways were no different, there was lush green with little to no trash lining the streets.

Our beloved Cayman Islands is known as one of the most beautiful places in the Caribbean, and there was a sense of pride in keeping it that way. We are known throughout the Caribbean and throughout the world as the gem of the Caribbean. While we are still considered to be a very clean and well-kept country, in recent years, we have sadly started to see some deterioration in this area. To address this issue, the Minister of Tourism established a Beautification Task Force under the leadership of the Chairperson, Mrs. Teresa Lewis-Pitcairn and myself as the parliamentary representative. This Cabinet-appointed committee consists of members from all districts including the Sister Islands.

Since its establishment, teams in various districts have met with property owners to educate them on the cost and process of removing derelict vehicles from their properties. While this work is continuing, I can report that the Department of Environmental Health (DEH) tagged 622 derelict vehicles for removal in 2022 in Grand Cayman and 38 in the Sister Islands making a total of 660 vehicles tagged in 2022. Of those, 154 in Grand Cayman and 4 in the Sister Islands were removed by DEH, amounting to 158 in total.

Mr. Speaker, I should point out that it is not by any means, a free service. Each vehicle removed by the DEH comes at a cost of \$75, which means our Government and the people of these Islands bore the expense of \$11,550 to have these unsightly vehicles moved to the landfill in 2022. A further 294 derelict cars were removed by their owners who rightfully took accountability for their property and disposed of it in the appropriate manner. In 2023, between January and November, a further 494 derelict vehicles were removed by the DEH in Grand Cayman and 28 in the Sister Islands, making a grand total of 522.

I sincerely thank the efforts of the DEH in this regard and I am pleased to note that there will be a heightened focus in this area going forward since the DEH received a new grab truck in September. That piece of equipment is solely dedicated to the DEH environmental officers to identify and remove derelict vehicles from our communities.

Mr. Speaker, another area the Beautification Task Force has targeted is that of illegal garages. Working with the Department of Commerce and Investment (DCI) under the Trade and Business Law, we have been seeking out people who have numerous derelict vehicles and car parts on their residential properties. If a home is constructed to live in, it is considered residential, not commercial. Yet, in many residential areas, garages are seen popping up. This is against the law. Mr. Speaker, I repeat, this is against the law.

In 2022, the DCI received 17 reports of illegal garages and in the first quarter of this year 2023, the DCI received 8 reports. Investigations and inspections were carried out by trade officers resulting in warnings and tickets being issued where breaches of the Trade and Business Act had been identified.

In addition to supporting these actions by the various government entities, the BTF also embarked on a nationwide anti-littering marketing campaign. This campaign was a coordinated multimedia drive which sought the public's assistance and cooperation in reporting instances of littering, illegal dumping and derelict vehicles. The campaign commenced on 1st August 2023 and ended on October 31st. It was aimed at residents and visitors alike and included various public service announcements which were carried on radio stations, print, online and social media channels, electronic billboards and the Cayman Islands Government intranet and CIG TV News broadcasts. By all accounts, the campaign was a huge success in sensitising the public to being more responsible about how they dispose of their garbage. I look forward to running a new media campaign in the New Year, 2024.

Following the campaign's completion, the Beautification Task Force also procured roadside signs for installation across all three Islands. We consulted with the National Roads Authority, the Public Lands Commission and the Department of Environmental Health to ensure we work within the confines of the Law and to ensure that the signs were placed in areas with the most visibility and need. I'm going to take this opportunity to thank these departments for always doing their part to assist in whatever way they can. We sure have some dedicated workers.

To date, signs have been installed at the various ports of entry, ensuring our visitors know the rules surrounding littering upon their arrival. They have been placed at both of our international airports, the General Aviation building and strategically placed at the entry to our seaports, including the Royal Watler Terminal, the North and South Cruise Ship Passenger Terminal, and the Spotts Dock. We did not forget Cayman Brac and Little Cayman; signs have also been installed at the Creek Dock and Scott's Dock in Cayman Brac. Signage for the Salt Rocks Dock in Little Cayman is in the process of being shipped to that location and will be installed in the New Year.

During phase two of the anti-littering signage campaign, the BTF aims to place signs in every district

particularly along frequently used roadways and in areas with known illegal dumping sites. Additionally, we are appealing to those who receive permission to hang banners on fences advertising an event, to please remember to remove them once the event has concluded. It is quite noticeable when they are left to deteriorate and become an eyesore. The BTF will also be affixing notices at various beaches asking the public to dispose of garbage responsibly because littering is in fact a crime.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to note that the Minister of Tourism and Ports submitted a Cabinet note developed from recommendations received by the Task Force suggesting an amendment to increase the littering fine from \$500 to \$10,000, depending on the type of offence. Minister Bryan and I continue to advocate for revisions to the existing legislation in this regard.

With respect to some of the initiatives undertaken by the District Committees since the inception of the Beautification Task Force:

- The West Bay Committee hosted two clean-up events each during the months of July, August and September 2022, successfully removing 250 bags of trash in the district. In 2023, they've undertaken several speaking opportunities at school assemblies in their district.
- The George Town subcommittee also held a clean-up during 2022, but mainly focused its efforts on reporting and removing derelict vehicles. They have had much success in this area and as indicated assisted in removing 95 derelict vehicles from [the] George Town district. In 2023, they broadened their efforts to include poorly managed garbage receptacles at private complexes and businesses.
- I am very pleased to note that both eastern districts partner with other organisations to assist clean-up activities in East End and North Side. The North Side subcommittee also reports the tagging of approximately 50 derelict vehicles for removal from that district during 2022.
- The Savannah Newlands districts have worked hard to keep our area clean. Just recently, we beautified the roundabout in Savannah which brought much hope and very high expectations in our community; and
- The district of West Bay are also expecting to finalise their Christmas project in the coming days.

I trust that given all that you have heard regarding the work of the Beautification Task Force that we are well on our way to make an indelible mark on our community landscapes. Even so, I encourage everyone to roll up their sleeves and share in the responsibility for getting rid of the litter culture that has crept across our shores because we all have to be part of the solution rather than contributing to the pollution.

I wish to also publicly note that the DEH has secured successful convictions for littering, which now

gives us a reason to push for civic pride and encourage people to keep their properties, yards, roadsides and empty parcels of land, clean and tidy. If every resident kept their little corner clean, without expecting it to be the responsibility of Government, what a beautiful, clean Island we would have.

I take this opportunity to thank all of the hard-working members of the Beautification Task Force chaired by Mrs. Teresa Lewis; and I particularly commend the staff in the Ministry of Tourism and Ports, particularly, Mrs. Mona Meade for her outstanding support.

Before moving on to my next subject area, I would like to remind the public that reports of littering or illegal dumping should be made to the Department of Environmental Health via 949-6696 or through this website: www.gov.ky/deh.

Social Development

Turning our attention now to the area of social development for which I also serve as Parliamentary Secretary. My heart is full of gratitude as I reflect on the remarkable strides we have taken in social development over the past two years. Our commitment to a future where the wellbeing of our citizens takes precedence has guided us into shaping a society that values connections and empowers every individual.

In my role as Parliamentary Secretary for Social Development I've had the opportunity to be involved in a wide range of projects and programmes spearheaded by the Ministry of Social Development and other Ministries and Departments. Projects that make a fundamental difference to the lives of a wide cross-section of our country, of our community; such as the new Intergenerational Hub, which is a testament to collaboration and will bridge generations, fostering dialogue, sharing knowledge and nurturing a sense of cultural identity.

In addition, Older Persons' Month has remained a beacon of celebration and empowerment, showcasing the rich contributions and unique perspectives of our elders. Their experiences resonate in the tapestry of our society and this annual, month-long event ensures their well-being and inclusion in every facet of our community.

Mr. Speaker, as we chart our course forward, legislation remains a cornerstone of our social development efforts. Amendments to the Children Act and establishment of the Office of the Children's Commissioner underscore a commitment to fortify the protection and welfare of our most vulnerable. Simultaneously, the repeal and replacement of the Adoption of Children Act and amendments to the Older Persons Act, further reflect our dedication to a just and compassionate society. Anticipating the implementation of new legislation, we look ahead with optimism.

Our plans to reimagine the Department of Children and Family Services and the Sunrise Adult Training Centre demonstrate our commitment to a society

where every citizen can thrive. I want to emphasise that the strength of our society lies not only in the legislation we enact, but in the collaborative effort of people who propel us forward; one that cherishes every Member, regardless of age, background, or circumstance. Our commitment to social development should be unwavering and we must strive to create an environment where every individual feels seen and valued. In the spirit of unity, I encourage each one of you to actively participate in the initiatives that lie ahead, whether it's supporting programmes or simply extending a helping hand to a neighbour. Let us be the architects of positive change in our community.

I take this opportunity to thank the Minister of Social Development, André Ebanks and his staff in the Ministry. Also heartfelt thanks to Miss Angela Mowbray, our PA, for her passion and her drive. She wears her heart on her sleeve too.

In conclusion, let us move forward with a shared vision, a vision that intertwines our past, present and future. Together, let us create a society with compassion, understanding and opportunity to find a collective journey.

Winding up my remarks, I would like to take this opportunity to send out warm and hearty Christmas wishes to my people of Savannah and thank them for their full support. I should also take this opportunity to thank my family for their continued love and for always being by my side. I extend special thanks to all the staff at the community office for their unwavering support and dedication in carrying out the duties of the office in our absence; Debbie and LeeAnn, you're appreciated.

I am thankful for our efforts from the RCIPS who keep us safe 24/7, I greatly value the close and productive relationship we have enjoyed over the years, and long may it continue.

At the community level, my colleague and I, Hon. Wayne Panton, MP for Newlands, continue to make great strides in improving the quality of life for all of our residents through initiatives such as programmes for seniors, playground equipment for our children, upgrading of roads and installation of traffic calming measures— and I would like to thank Honourable Jay and the NRA staff who have always been very supportive— deep wells, street lights and as you have heard, Mr. Speaker, working with the NRA and BTF and NiCE programmes to keep our community clean.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, I would like to bring my contribution to a close by thanking the staff here at Parliament for their assistance in every way. The staff here is devoted and committed to go above and beyond during the times we are here. I wish them all a peaceful and joyous Christmas. To my colleagues, may you have a most enjoyable time with your families and have a safe and healthy holiday season.

I wish to thank my Savannah constituents for entrusting me with the responsibility of being their representative. It is a job I take to heart and regard very seriously. I always tell people, if this is one area they

wish to occupy a seat in this honourable House, it is not a 9 to 5 job, it is 24/7, Mr. Speaker, as you are very aware. You must know your people and you must be committed to the task at hand.

With that, I would like to wish the entire Cayman Islands the happiest festive season, and always remember the reason for the season. May your Christmas sparkle with moments of love, laughter and goodwill. I pray that your year ahead will be filled with contentment and joy and may God bless us all and these beautiful Cayman Islands.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Desk thumping]

The Speaker: Thank you Member for Savannah. Does any other—

The Minister of Sustainability and Climate Resiliency.

[Pause]

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks, Minister of Sustainability & Climate Resiliency, Elected Member for West Bay Central: Good evening, Mr. Speaker, and to all of my colleagues here in this honourable House.

I also would like to just take a moment to wish evening greetings to all of those who are watching or listening to these proceedings, whether it is locally, or some of our Caymanians who are in university or have chosen to migrate to other countries. I am happy that you all have tuned in this evening.

Let me first say that it is amazing to see how things can change in a month. Due to the interest of time, I was unable to offer congratulatory remarks to you at the last Special Meeting, so today, Mr. Speaker, I congratulate you and I say that I am already pleased to see the approach that you have taken to continue moving our Parliament into an efficient and modern fashion and direction. I believe you deserve a special congratulation Sir, for ditching the wig.

[Laughter]

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: All of us in this honourable House know how much pride you take in your hair—

[Laughter]

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: —and it seems like the public didn't really have much use for the wig either. I think that you were a well-suited individual to pave the way with ditching the wig.

Just a few weeks ago, Mr. Speaker, while I was sitting where you sit today, I presided over a Special Meeting in which it became very clear to me that our country's leadership was in crisis. As I listened to the

debate, it became increasingly clear to me what I had to do. In my head and in my heart, I knew the choice I had to make to preserve the stability our country needed and ensure our Government was able to meet its financial obligation. I resigned from the role of Speaker of Parliament and joined the newly formed United People's Movement.

Before I discuss the allocations from my Ministry, I want to take a moment to thank my former teammates, the staff of Parliament, who worked so diligently behind the scenes to ensure the important work of this honourable House was able to take place. Mr. Speaker, as I am sure you are already learning, you are in very good hands. I am proud of the changes that I was able to make during my short tenure as Speaker, but no doubt, none of those initiatives would have been possible without the support and hard work of the Parliament staff. Resigning from that role and leaving the team was by no means an easy decision.

When I resigned as Speaker, it was for the express purpose of ensuring we could be here today to Table the 2024-2026 budget. As the people's elected representatives, our responsibility is to make the right decisions, not the easy ones. I think I've said it a few times, but that is because it certainly wasn't easy, but I do know it was right. That's why I'm very proud to be here today, a Member of the Government, to contribute to the Second Reading of the Appropriation Bill for 2024-2025 Financial Years. Once approved, this will ensure that the Cayman Islands Government is able to meet our financial obligations for the 2024-2025 budget period.

Sustainability and Climate Resiliency

I spoke earlier about the Parliament team. Now, I have the privilege to speak today on the Ministry of Sustainability and Climate Resiliency's contribution to the budget.

Over the past few weeks, the new team that I have joined in this Ministry have embraced me with open arms, offered amazing support and they have gone above and beyond to help me hit the ground running. I'm grateful for their support and I'm looking forward to the work that is still to come. I'm very excited for the opportunity to take on this ministerial role, having had some insight into what this entails in my previous role as Parliamentary Secretary.

However, before I was a Parliamentary Secretary, before I was the Deputy Speaker and then Speaker, before I took up this ministerial role, I was the elected representative for West Bay Central. That is the one thing that has not changed. Throughout all of these roles that I have taken [on] and had the privilege to serve [in], it's who I work for. Like everyone else in this honourable House, I work for the people of the Cayman Islands. Before I delve into the budget and the strategic

priorities for the next two years, I want to put my Ministry's work into perspective when it comes to the people of the Cayman Islands.

Mr. Speaker, my constituents are diverse, ranging from established families to single mothers balancing caring for their children with earning an income, and also single fathers; from older persons relying on their pensions to make ends meet, to recent graduates trying to find jobs in a crowded labour market. I believe that is the general makeup today of our native Caymanians. Though their day to day challenges might look quite different, I hear the same concerns over and over again, but they all come down to the same issue that I hear quite often, *Ms. Katherine, I am worried that there is no place for me in my own country.*

Mr. Speaker, no home that they can afford to buy, no bill that isn't one rate increase away from being unaffordable, no spot on the beach where they can sit on without fearing they may be chased away by security guards, no jobs that they are qualified for or that pay them enough for them to get by. In many ways it seems or sometimes feels like Caymanians are being overpriced, outbid and outsourced right out of their own homeland.

Now, what does that have to do with the subject areas in my Ministry of Sustainability and Climate Resiliency? Well, there are many in our community who believe that those who are working to create a more sustainable future for our beloved Cayman Islands are trying to stop development, stop roads and stop progress. They are simply working to get in the way of things that are good for our people. I can't speak for the position or rationale that was taken previously from the ministerial seat of this Ministry, but as I said to the staff and students of the University College of the Cayman Islands (UCCI) just a few days ago at their sustainable UCCI workshop, sustainability is one of those words that means many different things to many different people.

The concept of sustainability that this Government is talking about in the Strategic Policy Statement is about balancing our economy, our society and our environment—

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: Better balance.

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: —so we can ensure that the long-term success of our people, our institutions and our Islands are looked after. This, Mr. Speaker, is not only sustainability, but also sustainable economic growth.

This is where we as a Government look at creating programmes to address our social ills coupled with measuring the rate we choose to grow our economy while simultaneously developing training programmes to ensure that our people are not left behind. Yes, Mr. Speaker, importantly, we need to ensure that while our country grows, we are not compromising our environment in the process. Let's face it, there were

many other opportunities for decisions to have been made in the past to ensure that Caymanians were not left out or left behind in our own country and we all know that the burdens our own people are carrying today is not because of anything other than a failure to balance the needs of our own people along with balancing the growth and development of our country.

Before I move past this point of balancing growth and development, I want to give an assurance to all of the water sports operators, that as Minister, I've already started looking at implementing the recommendations that were made under Private Member's Motion No. 4 of 2022-2023, my very first attempt to file a motion which was cut short due to having to take the Chair. I'd now like to thank the elected Member for West Bay West for moving the Motion and the elected Member for Bodden Town East for seconding the Motion. This honourable House resolved that, **"Government considers placing a moratorium on the granting of new wildlife interaction zone licences until such time as the task force has reported its findings back to the Government..."**

However, I have been reliably informed that to impose a moratorium, legislative changes may be required. I give a commitment that this is a priority for me, and in the interim, [I will establish a task force on North Sound water sports operations within quarter one of 2024, while working on the requirements to make legislative changes to place a moratorium on the granting of the wildlife interaction zone \(WIZ\) licence.](#)

This too, aligns with sustainability ensuring that we are not over saturating our Stingray City and sandbar, which poses a safety element for our people and our precious stingrays. Equally important, is making sure that the very people who built this industry are given a fair opportunity in the market.

As I move on, I would like to ask the Members here today to think about which of your constituents rely on their backyard farm or like what I have in my district, those who rely on those tight fishing lines to make up the grocery shortfall, to put food on the table. Think about those who cannot afford to run their air conditioning because the cost of electricity is just too high. Think about the children, adults, senior citizens and persons with disabilities, those with the roofs that have tires and blocks holding down the patches of zinc; and as the Minister said earlier, I got a phone call this morning too of a leaking roof. Think about those whose yards flood even after the slightest downpour. Again, we see this a lot in my constituency, and I'd like to go on record to thank the Minister of Infrastructure who has started his storm water management plan which is providing results, albeit a bit slow, it's a slow process. However, as a sailor, I can appreciate that some journeys are longer than others.

Mr. Speaker, with that context provided, I now ask each Member, which of your constituents are going to be the most impacted the next time we have a hurricane, which ones are going to suffer the most because

of the changes in rainfall patterns that we are already seeing, which ones are not going to be able to flush their toilets when the next king tide happens, which of those will be most at risk to heat stroke when the temperatures skyrocket in the summer months?

Mr. Speaker, our own scientists, the ones working for the Cayman Islands Government who are almost all Caymanians themselves, are telling us that the temperatures are going up, that the sea is rising, that hurricanes are getting more intense, that we are seeing less rainfall overall, but that the rainstorms are more intense when they do happen, and they are telling us that if we want to protect our people, their homes and their jobs that we need to start doing things differently.

Sustainability is so much more than just the environment, Mr. Speaker. It is about economic success that benefits everyone. It is about a safe, clean and connected community that are accessible to everyone, and it's about clean energy that everyone can afford. It's about quality education for every learner no matter their age or ability and underpinning all of those things is a healthy, vibrant natural world. When we do not protect our environment, it is our people who suffer and we cannot afford not to do this, sir.

However, Mr. Speaker, as Minister of Sustainability, I also recognise that the most important and valuable endangered species that exists in the Cayman Islands are the Caymanians. We must ensure that as a Government, as Government Members and certainly as Ministers, in any capital project that we undertake and any Cabinet decision that is made, we come back to this decision: how will this impact the lives of the Caymanian people? Will our decision affect their natural habitat? What are we doing to ensure that no action we take or allow to be taken diminishes the quality of life and future opportunities for Caymanians? Indeed, Mr. Speaker, we must establish policies that enhance the quality of life and opportunities for our own people.

Mr. Speaker, another important asset in the Cayman Islands according to the 2020 Cayman Islands Ecosystem Accounts is the natural services provided by our seagrasses, our mangrove wetlands, our coral reefs, our arable lands and our ancient forest [which] have a partial value of \$3 billion. This includes \$309 million worth of carbon dioxide stored by our wetlands and forests, \$112 million worth of coastal protection, \$943 million worth of tourism added value, \$51 million worth of recreation, substance and small-scale commercial fishing; and \$297 million worth of livestock and arable land production. To everyone listening, please remember that figure, a partial value of \$3 billion, and consider that the Ministry's proposed budget amounts to less than half of one per cent of the ecosystem services it is responsible for safeguarding; less than half of one per cent.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry's budget is focused on improving the success and longevity of our people, our institutions and our Islands through three key policy

areas: energy, equality and environment. These policy areas directly support climate resiliency and sustainable development which the 2024-2026 Strategic Policy Statement recognises as being essential to helping future proof our country and improving the quality of life for Caymanians.

Energy is a key priority area for my Ministry. We will continue to explore solutions for sustainable and renewable energy. Nevertheless, we will balance that against the immediate and ongoing need to ensure that we are providing energy in the most cost effective manner possible.

Equality is a key priority area because inequality anywhere is a threat to peace and prosperity everywhere. Inequality and inequity between genders, between ages and between people of differing abilities, hinders us from unblocking the full potential of all our people to be healthy, happy, productive members of our communities through all stages of our lives.

Our environment is a key priority area because our ecosystems are fundamental to every aspect of life on our Islands, and because healthy, vibrant natural habitats can help shield our people's lives and livelihoods from the worst impacts of global environmental change.

We have aligned the strategic goals for the Ministry of Sustainability and Climate Resiliency for the 2024-2026 budget period with these three key policy areas of energy, equality and environment.

Energy

Mr. Speaker, I will start with the policy area of energy because even though temperatures have tailed off from the summer months, our electricity bills have not. When the electricity cost and fuel peaked in 2022, the PACT Government spent millions of dollars to lessen the economic burden on our people. Though necessary to protect our people from the brunt of these cost increases, at the end of the day, it still was the people's money that was used to offset these costs; public funds that could have been prioritised in other urgently needed areas. Even with that support, we have to acknowledge that these subsidies were only band-aids and temporary fixes, and while important and appreciated, they did not help to address the root cause of the matter or create sustained benefit. Even after these subsidies, many people were still facing hundreds of dollars' worth of electricity bills, money that I am sure those families would have gladly rather put towards other aspects of their lives. In my constituency of West Bay Central, many of my constituents did not even get to benefit from this attempt to offset cost.

Meanwhile, Mr. Speaker, the volatility of global fuel markets and the vulnerabilities in our supply chain that contributed to these spikes in the cost of electricity mean that it is imperative that we continue to explore solutions for sustainable and affordable energy. Plus, I don't have to remind anyone in this honourable House

that not being able to keep the lights on, the fridge running and the house cool is not just an inconvenience, especially with the temperatures rising, it is a serious threat to human health and safety particularly for those with young children and older persons or family members with chronic illnesses or disabilities who rely on medical devices. If we are to make headway in reducing the cost of electricity on our people in the long term, we need to be actively facilitating the shift towards majority renewable energy paired with improved energy efficiency in residences, businesses and government-owned buildings.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry in collaboration with many other key stakeholders in the public and private sectors have made significant strides in this policy area over the past two years, and the budget contains funds to ensure this vital work is able to continue. One important example of this work was the Ministry's efforts in conjunction with the Energy Policy Council to complete the five-year review of the National Energy Policy 2017-2037, and develop a draft updated National Energy Policy 2023-2050 and Implementation Plan. These important documents went out for public consultation earlier this year and the Ministry's energy policy team is looking forward to sharing these documents with the UPM Administration as soon as possible. I also intend to meet with the Opposition Members to seek their feedback as the Leader of the Opposition made contributions earlier today, which should not be overlooked, and the only way to get the policy right is when a collaborative approach is taken.

The draft updated National Energy Policy proposes new national targets for renewable energy, electric vehicles and greenhouse gas emissions. These targets will bring Cayman in line with other comparable jurisdictions and help accelerate our transition to a greener energy future. The Ministry's budget therefore includes funds to support the implementation of the updated National Energy Policy, once approved.

Simultaneously, the Ministry has been actively pursuing programmes and initiatives to improve energy efficiency in local homes, businesses and government-owned buildings through efforts that include the European-grant funded Cayman Islands Government Energy Efficiency Programme, the Cayman Home Energy Efficiency Retrofit (CHEER) and the Do it Yourself Energy Audits public awareness campaign.

The Cayman Islands Government Energy Efficiency Programme funded through a grant from the Resiliency, Sustainable Energy and Marine Biodiversity Programme (RESEMBID) is particularly impactful because it will facilitate energy efficiency improvements and retrofits for both existing public sector buildings and National Housing Development Trust (NHDT) homes, training to build capacity locally, establish minimum energy efficiency standards for new builds and assess the best financing mechanisms to support the retrofit of additional public sector buildings and homes.

As a part of this programme, energy audits were recently conducted on 13 government-owned buildings including the one we are in right now. I won't make you try to guess how much energy this building uses per year [but] I know that I couldn't believe the figure when I saw it, more than one million kilowatt hours per year. This was higher than any of the 12 other government buildings audited under the programme. However, I also think that it's a reflection of the fact that this building and its staff continually work quietly behind the scenes. Needless to say our House of Parliament is at the top of the list to undergo energy efficiency retrofits as a part of this programme.

Now that the energy audits have been completed for both the selected government buildings and NHDT homes, my Ministry looks forward to sharing more details on the proposed retrofits and the planned improvements to a selection of pre-existing government-built affordable homes in the coming weeks.

Important to note is that this grant-funded programme is just the beginning. The lessons learnt from these pilot programmes to retrofit three government buildings and 10 NHDT homes will help us design programmes to do much, much more and have an even more significant impact. I'm also looking forward to seeing this programme rolled out later, hopefully in my own constituency where NHDT homes are also due to be constructed—and I'm sure the Minister will speak to that when he delivers his address.

Therefore, the Ministry's budget includes funds to develop, adopt and implement programmes, policies and educational campaigns to support greater energy efficiency in new construction and existing residential and public sector buildings.

Mr. Speaker, I hope this brief overview has provided Members and the listening public with a greater clarity on why the transition to renewable energy and greater efficiency is important and how our proposed budget and strategic goals serve to further these aims that will benefit our economy, national security and the health and wellbeing of our people.

Equality

Mr. Speaker, our people are at the heart of this United People's Movement. At the end of the day, our efforts to make Cayman's energy sector more sustainable are directly linked to the positive outcomes for our people, and so are our efforts under the policy of equality.

As the Ministry's portfolio now includes gender affairs as a policy area, the budget also includes funds for the provision of administrative, research and analytical services to the Gender Equality Tribunal.

According to the 2021 census, the population of our Islands is 49.3 per cent female. Our highest population growth rates occurred in the 65 and older age groups, so ensuring that our legislation, our policies

and our programmes work for people of different genders, of different ages and of different abilities is clearly an issue of increasing importance.

What does it mean for our economy, that the fastest growing age demographic of our population is over the age of retirement? What does it mean for our health services that more than 100 people out of every 1,000 has an illness related to a disability? What does it mean for our community when half the population is at greater risk of sexual violence? As I said earlier, inequality between people of different genders ages and abilities prevents us from unlocking the full potential of our people to be healthy, happy and productive members of our society. The Ministry's budget therefore includes funds to support the review and revision of the National Policy on Gender Equity and Equality in addition to the implementation of the Sexual Harassment Act, once passed in Parliament.

The Gender Affairs policy team will continue to work collaboratively with government agencies, committees and non-governmental organisations to raise awareness and recognition that equality between gender, age and ability is a crosscutting theme that must be considered by each sector and integrated into the projects and programmes of each Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, I hope this summary makes it clear that issues of inequality affect everyone in our community. Making our policies, our economy and our physical space more accessible to these individuals does not just directly benefit those who are impacted, it also makes the lives for everyone in our community better.

Environment

Mr. Speaker, I'll just speak a bit about the environment. As I said before, people are at the heart of this administration and budget, and our natural world underpins every aspect of life on our Islands and protects our people's lives and livelihoods from the worst impacts of global environmental change.

The protection of our beautiful beaches, our coral reefs, our mangroves, our rocky forests, our bluff cliffs, our ponds and our caves will benefit everyone in our community, not just today, but for generations to come; and our people know this.

In the last call for protected area nominations, the National Conservation Council received 89 nominations from individuals, non-profits, landowners and realtors.

Mr. Speaker, the process for protecting land under the National Conservation Act is completely driven by the people of the Cayman Islands. They are speaking up and telling us which areas of our Islands are special to them and which ones they believe future generations should be able to enjoy exactly how we are able to enjoy them now.

The Ministry's budget also takes into account our people's calls for more protected areas: The community outrage expressed whenever there is an act of poaching, as there was recently, when more than 40 pounds of conches were taken from the Barkers Marine Park; the level of community support expressed to implement the Climate Change Policy, once approved; and to increase sustainability and climate resiliency in our approach to development.

Importantly, the budget also includes provisions to continue our efforts to enhance biosecurity in collaboration with the Ministry and Department of Agriculture and address the threat of alien invasive species. Over the years, the Cayman Islands Government has spent millions of dollars' worth of public funds to tackle the spread of destructive, invasive species like green iguanas and lionfish.

The National Conservation (Alien Species) Regulations 2022, are an important milestone in our efforts to ensure our native and indigenous animals and plants are not at risk from other imported threats. The Ministry's budget also includes funds to support the administration of environmental legislation, multi-agency response to marine pollution such as oil spills and other key management and assessment services administered by the Ministry and Department of Environment.

The Ministry took the lead on the ReGen Project and the negotiations in 2021 and both sides of the project are continuing to work diligently to iron out the handful of remaining conditions precedent still to be agreed.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to assure the members of this House that the United People's Movement is thoroughly committed to seeing this important national project through to completion. We are equally committed to ensuring that this deal is the best it can be for the people of the Cayman Islands.

For ReGen to be truly the future of sustainable waste management in the Cayman Islands, it needs to be affordable now, and in the long term. As we continue to finalise negotiations for this important project, our main priority will be ensuring that ReGen delivers all of the intended benefits to our economy, society, and environment, without placing undue financial burden on our people.

Mr. Speaker, this budget also has an allocation for the completion of Phase One of the remediation project. As everyone knows, I am new to this Ministry and still familiarising myself with this project. The Leader of the Opposition made mention of the deadline of 30th November being missed. For the avoidance of doubt, I want to make it known that this had nothing to do with this new Government formation. Rather, as previously mentioned, conditions precedent are still being finalised.

As a new Minister, I have already identified that there is a dire need for improved communications between the CIG project team, the Minister, and Cabinet, and I give the assurance to do just that, Mr. Speaker. I

would also like to give an assurance to all who hear me today: This project will get my full attention, and I will do everything in my power to ensure that it is, indeed, value for money. This project is the largest in terms of expenditure that the government has ever undertaken. It has to be done right, and it has to benefit the people of the Cayman Islands. I will accept nothing less than that, Mr. Speaker.

As my colleague, Minister Bryan, noted in his Earth Day message earlier this year, caring for the environment has always been a part of the ethos of the Caymanian heritage. This is a sentiment I strongly agree with. I believe Caymanians were practicing the values of sustainability long before we used that word to describe our actions, and I am very encouraged by the increasing number of Caymanians who are translating these time-honoured values into new and innovative programmes and initiatives. They are putting sustainability into practice in everything they do, and they are asking us, the leaders they elected to represent them, to listen to them, and to lead by example. From the UCCI students who are supporting the sustainable UCCI initiative, to the young Caymanian entrepreneurs who are leading the way on eco-friendly cutlery, to our local farmers who are embracing restorative agriculture practices, and to our developers and designers who are incorporating sustainable design into their construction and retaining our native trees and plants in their landscaping.

In my own constituency, I'm planning to tap into nature's bounty with a serenity garden that will act as a community resource for everyone who calls West Bay Central home, supplying both nourishing food and green open space which is so important to supporting mental health and emotional well-being; but once again, I want to reiterate that sustainability is not just about the environment.

In addition to the roles we are representing here today, I know many of the honourable Members of this House are parents, like me, and as a proud Caymanian and proud mum, I believe we have a responsibility to the next generation to do our part to embrace sustainability, and put it into practice in everything that we do. Sustainability in its truest sense is about the longevity of our people, our institutions and our Islands.

In addition to protecting our environment, sustainability is about our economy. It is about our communities, and about making sure that all of our people are able to live happy, healthy, meaningful lives; to be productive members of our society and have their diverse needs met; and in its truest sense, it is about improving the lives of our Caymanians. Thus, sustainability brings together those key pillars— environment, economy, and society— and tells us that the only way we can build a firm foundation for our Islands, is if we balance all three.

Mr. Speaker, it's not just about climate change. Every single Ministry must be focused on sustainability, and a cross-Ministry approach is required, if we intend to address it. Every piece of legislation, every policy,

every programme, and every initiative that each Ministry takes, or plans to undertake, is designed to support our people now, and in the future.

I want to close my remarks by going back to something I said when I was last on the dais: at the end of the day, decisions that are being made should be made based on what is in the best interest of the country, and the best interest of the people of the Cayman Islands. Doing what is right is not always easy, Mr. Speaker, and as long as I'm a Member of Parliament, that is what I remain committed to do.

I would like to thank my colleagues in the United People's Movement for their support of the Ministry's proposed budget, and to the Honourable Premier for her leadership which has enabled us to be here today to present this budget, and meet our financial obligations to the people of the Cayman Islands. I'm proud to be here representing the constituents of West Bay Central, and the District of West Bay, and the Cayman Islands as well as my Ministry, and the people in this Government.

As I close, I'd like to just take a moment to implore all of those who are listening to have a Merry Christmas. My wish for all of the people who reside in the Cayman Islands is that you have a Holiday Season that reflects the old time Caymanian Christmas— a Christmas celebrated as if it was many years ago, at a time when we had less, fewer gifts, and the joys came from a yard of fresh white sand, conch shells, weeping willow trees, and perhaps some fresh white paint. Although those Christmases were long before my time, Mr. Speaker, an all-time Caymanian Christmas is what we all need— less hustle and bustle, less focus on material presents, and more time and fellowship being present with our families and our friends. Lastly, but most importantly, may we all remember that the reason for the season is the birth of God's son, Jesus, who came to give us love, hope, and joy; and this is certainly a season worth celebrating.

I thank you for an opportunity to present my Ministry's budget allocations today, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the good people of West Bay Central for entrusting me to be here today; my family, and my committee and constituency staff, without whose support I couldn't do this.

I thank you.

[Desk thumping]

The Speaker: Thank you, Madam Minister.

I think we've had seven speeches today.

[Inaudible interjection]

The Speaker: Eight? Well, we didn't do much today, but tomorrow we're going to give it hell.

[Laughter]

The Speaker: Madam Premier, may I call on you to move the adjournment until 10 o'clock tomorrow?

ADJOURNMENT

The Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly:
Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I move the adjournment of this honourable House until 10 a.m., tomorrow morning.

The Speaker: The question is that this House do now adjourn until 10 a.m. tomorrow morning. Those in favour, please say Aye. Those against, No.

AYES.

The Speaker: The Ayes have it. The House is adjourned until 10 a.m. tomorrow morning.

At 9.08 p.m. the House stood adjourned until 10 a.m., Tuesday, 12th December, 2023.