



**The Honourable Dr. Michael R. Darville
Minister for Grand Bahama
Contribution to the 2016/2017 Fiscal Budget
June, 2016**

Thank you Mr. Speaker!

Mr. Speaker, this morning I stand to make my contribution to this year's budget debate, and to lend my full support to the resolution to borrow one hundred million (\$100,000,000.00) dollars, the sum of which is required to govern this country effectively, within the next fiscal year, and enhance the lives of the Bahamian people.

Mr. Speaker, it seems like it was only yesterday, that I stood, as a novice Minister in this honourable place, to deliver my first budget communication, and to articulate this government's strategy to transform, restore and revitalize the economy of Grand Bahama, as outlined in our Charter for Governance.

Mr. Speaker, in fulfillment of a promise made in Our Charter for Governance, four years ago, I was named the first Minister for Grand Bahama Island; and mandated by the Honourable Member for Centerville, to orchestrate a comprehensive approach for the holistic development of the island of Grand Bahama. It was my belief then, that the future of our beautiful island looked bright, but I am convinced now,

more than ever, that our local economy is finally on the road to recovery; and for the first time in many years, our people are in a good position to reap the benefits.

Mr. Speaker, unlike existing ministries, there was no blue print in place for me to follow, as my ministry was an original. Nevertheless, with the support of my Permanent Secretary; a temporary employee by my side, and my briefcase in hand, I hit the ground running, and never looked back!

Mr. Speaker, in the lead up to the 2012 general elections, the Progressive Liberal Party committed to govern from day one. Despite the state of the economy at the time, and the many odds, known and unknown, that were stacked against us, we have and continue to give measured and focused attention to the island of Grand Bahama, from Day One.

Mr. Speaker, I must admit that there were numerous times when unforeseen challenges made the going tough; and yes, we experienced

many delays and setbacks. However, my belief in the people of Grand Bahama was and still is the driving force behind everything I do.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to express my gratitude to the people of Pineridge who have supported me over the years; assure them that I remain committed to their cause, and as their elected representative, I will continue to work tirelessly and diligently to create employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, bring relief to the underprivileged and the down trodden, and create programs that will empower all that seek to take advantage of them, irrespective of their political affiliation.

Mr. Speaker, with the passing of each year, I assess my performance as a Member of Parliament first, and then as a Cabinet Minister, and I often chastise myself for not being able to do more to eradicate poverty and unemployment. But in doing so, *Mr. Speaker*, I am reminded of these words penned by the late Father of this great nation and former leader of the Progressive Liberal Party, "We are not a rich country, but we certainly are not poor. We do not have all we want; neither do we have all we need; but we do have more than most people have and for that we

should be grateful. Everywhere people are struggling for the very things many of us take for granted. We have decent infrastructure, stability, freedom of speech and religion and the right to go where we please whenever we please. The poor are still with us, but, thank God, poverty does not stalk our land like many other places in the world and in our country everyone has access to basic health care and education.”

Mr. Speaker, it is with these realities in mind, that I am proud to carry the banner of the Progressive Liberal Party, to serve in this Christie led administration, and to be a part of a generation of leaders who are not only determined to address these challenges, but to make the sometimes unpopular, and rather necessary policy decisions that will help to shape our country into a stronger, safer, more prosperous and modern Bahamas.

Mr. Speaker, with our fiscal house now in order, and a projection of a further reduction in the government’s GFS deficit by four hundred and thirty nine million dollars (\$439,000,000.0000) at the end of the

2016/17 FISCAL year, I would say that we are definitely moving full steam ahead to accomplishing these objectives.

Mr. Speaker, with your leave sir, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Right Honorable Member for Centerville and the Member for Golden Isles for their excellent stewardship with the people's purse over the last four (4) years; and with the support of the technical team from the Ministry of Finance, for navigating our local economy through turbulent waters, back into safe harbour. It's been a rough journey, *Mr. Speaker*, but I am a firm believer that with God on our side, we will continue to ride out the storm.

Mr. Speaker, this administration's annual fiscal budgets have always been people-centric. They have allowed us to fulfill many of the promises outlined in our Charter for Governance, and to bring the much needed relief to the poor, elderly, and unemployed. This should not be surprising as the Progressive Liberal Party believes in putting Bahamians first, before personal gain or our party's agenda.

Mr. Speaker, this was recently demonstrated when the Progressive Liberal Party stood in solidarity on Friday, June 3, 2016, with union representatives as party leaders and supporters showed up in large numbers throughout New Providence and Grand Bahama Island to participate in the annual Sir Randol Fawkes Labour Day parade. *Mr. Speaker*, recognizing the significance of the labour movement in the country, and the role that the Father of Labour played in this movement, this administration sought to rename the Labour Day holiday after Sir Randol Fawkes, and we continue to honour and support the Bahamian workforce, which is evidenced in the increase of the minimum wage, and the recent announcement by the Member for Centreville in his 2016-2017 budget communication, that approximately three thousand (3,000) temporary and contract workers will be made permanent and pensionable employees of the public service.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to reiterate that since assuming office in 2012, this administration's budgets have always been fiscally responsible, and

simultaneously, socially conscious; while our policies and initiatives have enhanced the lives of the residents of Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, thousands of residents can boast of receiving much needed assistance and relief at the hands of the competent staff of my ministry's Customer Care and Duty Free Unit, which has been put in place by this caring administration.

Mr. Speaker, an example of these policies is the 2014 implementation of Duty Free concessions. Since this extension has occurred, we have seen a significant impact on a wide cross-section of registered businesses, in East and West Grand Bahama, which are currently improving their product, service quality and employment opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, the business types registered with The Duty Free Unit at my ministry include, but are not limited to eco-tours, fuel service stations, motels, janitorial services, landscaping, law chambers, funeral homes, water taxi services, take-out restaurants, and convenience stores.

Mr. Speaker, because of this new initiative, business owners are now able to use this duty waiver to save on capital costs, while accessing much needed supplies for sustaining their existing businesses; and or developing a new business.

Mr. Speaker, initially, the team responsible for this initiative hosted town hall meetings, used newspaper and social media, in effort to get the information out and create awareness to the public. As a result, in the year 2015, we saw an impressive growth of 63.16% in new applicants.

Mr. Speaker, given the ongoing initiatives of the team, including impromptu site visits, our projected growth for 2016 is one hundred and twenty six (126%).

Mr. Speaker, The Duty Free Unit within the Ministry for Grand Bahama has also served as the agency for accessing other concessions offered by the Ministry of Finance, for residents in Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, as an example, I wish to bring to the attention of this honorable House the story of a young entrepreneur, who had a small but successful business in West Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, with this success came the need for expansion; and its associated high costs. However, *Mr. Speaker*, thanks to this administration's extension of duty free concessions to business owners in the outlying settlements, I am happy to report that this business owner, through my ministry, was able to save tens of thousands of dollars through concessions, reinvest these savings, expand his business and create even more jobs for Bahamians in this outlying settlement.

Mr. Speaker, this administration cares about the growth and development of the entire island of Grand Bahama, and believes that farmers, contractors, mechanics, daycare and restaurant owners, whether they operate in Pelican Point or in West End, should be entitled to the same economic benefits as those in Freeport enjoy under the Hawksbill Creek Agreement.

Mr. Speaker, the late Sir Lynden Pindling, in his speech entitled, "The PLP Way," articulated that as leaders of this country it is incumbent upon us to create policies that will include the local business community, the underprivileged and "protect the least able to protect

themselves.” That is our hope Mr. Speaker and it is the PLP way. That is the only way that will allow rich and poor, black and white, employer and employee, private entrepreneur and civil servant to live in peace in our Bahamas.

Mr. Speaker, I am elated that through our innovative policies, this administration is changing the business landscape on our island and creating opportunities for our young people to become a part of the new Grand Bahama, which we are currently working toward.

Mr. Speaker, we are moving forward onward; and getting stronger

Mr. Speaker, allow me to also share a story about an unemployed young man, who like me, came from humble beginnings. *Mr. Speaker*, last year, he came to my ministry in search of a job; as he wanted to earn an honest living and be a contributor, both to his home and in the community. *Mr. Speaker*, I am pleased to report that today, this young man is one of fifty Grand Bahamians who were employed in the first phase of the Grand Bahama Shipyard’s Employment Programme, a new

government subsidized initiative aimed at training some two hundred (200) Bahamians within this year alone, and six hundred (600) Bahamians over the next four (4) years.

Mr. Speaker, Grand Bahama is still indeed the industrial capital of The Bahamas; and the role in which the industrial sector plays, in terms of services offered, the auxiliary businesses needed, the entrepreneurial and employment opportunities created, remain crucial to the continued growth and development of our island.

Cognizant of this, **Mr. Speaker,** in our Charter for Governance, this administration made a commitment to initiate and intensify discussions with industry operators in Grand Bahama, with a view to dramatically reduce the number of non-nationals employed, and to ensure that available positions are filled by Bahamians; as well as to double the investment in education. It is with the fulfillment of these commitments in mind, that the partnership between the government and The Grand Bahama Shipyard was birthed.

Mr. Speaker, unlike the former administration's fifty two (52) week program, this innovative employment program incorporates international certification, and on the job technical training; which will afford participants the opportunity, upon completion of the year training to be permanently employed.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to report that Phase One recruits have already been on the job for approximately two (2) months; and the interview process for Phase Two is currently underway.

Mr. Speaker, I am also pleased to report that the Grand Bahama Shipyard is eager to begin its enrollment process for its expanded, highly recognized apprenticeship program. This year the enrollment will increase from twelve (12) to forty (40), as a result of this government's commitment to match the amount of apprentices that the Shipyard intakes this summer.

Mr. Speaker, we are moving forward onward; and getting stronger

Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the management team at The Grand Bahama Shipyard; as well as the lecturers and technical staff, for their assistance in preparing more Grand Bahamians to be partakers, not just spectators, in the lucrative opportunities available at this world class ship repair and refurbishment facility.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to this unique program, with the support of the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, and in collaboration with the private sector, my ministry has established The Grand Bahama High School Technical and Industrial Career Fair, which is designed to introduce our senior students to the careers available in the industrial sector, as well as the major employers in these areas. Thanks to this career fair, we are finally capturing students, from all schools on the island, who may have technical, maritime and industrial interests; and steering them in the direction of which there are hundreds of lucrative positions available.

Mr. Speaker, we are moving forward onward; and getting stronger

Mr. Speaker, I now turn my focus to the 2016 – 2017 Budget. **Mr. Speaker**, the resonating theme and message for my budget contribution is clear and simple; and can be summarized in four words: Grand Bahama is Stronger! Not since the early 2000's has there been so much economic growth, social advancement, opportunities available to, and hope among so many Grand Bahamians. Of course, like any other island in The Bahamas or any community in the world, we have our challenges with youth unemployment, and yes we have a long way to go to building the kind of island and community in which we all desire to live.

Nevertheless, **Mr. Speaker**, I can boldly and proudly stand in this Honourable place today and declare that compared to where we were four years ago; we are better, we are stronger and Grand Bahama is definitely headed in the right direction. We are proud of our achievements thus far; and **Mr. Speaker**, 2016 will prove to be the year

where the average person will feel the long awaited trickledown effect of what we have been doing for the last four years.

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

For this reason, **Mr. Speaker**, this administration, under the prudent leadership of the Right Honourable Member for Centerville, since coming to office, has been tackling these challenges through fiscally sound measures, which are yielding positive results. Our plan has always been to reduce the country's deficit and national debt, secure and strengthen vital programs such as National Health Insurance, provide our uniformed officers with the resources they need to protect Bahamian families, and make the government of The Bahamas more efficient, effective and accountable to hard-working taxpayers.

Mr. Speaker, in keeping with the government's fiscally sound policies, the Ministry for Grand Bahama has managed to keep within the financial parameters of its 2015-2016 allocated budget. I would like to

take this opportunity to publically thank my colleague Minister and the Member of Parliament for Golden Isles, and the competent staff at the Ministry of Finance, for their assistance in funding meaningful projects on the island of Grand Bahama. These projects, which I will discuss in detail throughout my budget, would not have been realized in a timely fashion, if it were not for the support of the Ministry of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, I am happy to report that my ministry has met most of its requirements in the 2015-2016 fiscal year, and we look forward to the 2016-2017 budget year with much hope and enthusiasm as we continue to meet our targeted goals, in conjunction with the Ministry of Works and Urban Development and the Department of Urban Renewal 2.0, as we seek to better the lives of the residents of Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, as the Ministry for Grand Bahama evolved, so has its budget. Each year, additional administrative responsibilities and new projects have been added to my ministry's portfolio; hence the need for

increased funding. However, since accepting the administrative role for payment of the street lighting in East and West Grand Bahama, and the electricity and water bills for all government agencies on the island of Grand Bahama, through proper identification, monitoring and controlling of waste measures and staff education service-wide, we have been able to realize tremendous savings in the government's utility bills. Additionally, the Ministry of Finance has re-allocated funding of travel expenditure and office supplies and stationary to their budget. These cost saving initiatives have resulted in a reduction of the Ministry for Grand Bahama's 2016-2017 budget, by approximately two million dollars (\$2,000,000.00).

Mr. Speaker, we anticipate a further reduction in the government's electricity bills on the island of Grand Bahama as my ministry has embarked upon a pilot LED lighting programme, in which LED lights will be installed in the Harold DeGregory Complex, where my Ministry is located; the Garnet Levarity Justice Centre, the Bahamas Technical & Vocational Institute campus and the Freeport Post Office. *Mr. Speaker*,

once these buildings are completed, it is this administration's long-term goal to retrofit each government owned building with LED lights.

Mr. Speaker, you will also note in my budget that there are two new line items. The first contains two million dollars (\$2,000,000.00), which has been earmarked for the Grand Bahama Shipyard's Employment programme; and the second line item contains one million dollars (\$1,000,000.00) which has been allocated for the provision for contingencies. *Mr. Speaker*, this funding will be used for the payment of services rendered on behalf of other government agencies on the island of Grand Bahama. Projects such as the East End potable water project, the new cemetery for East Grand Bahama and the resurveying of crown land for the regularization of persons who have constructed homes and/or businesses there, are just some examples of projects that will be funded through this line item. I will discuss these projects and many others throughout my communication.

Hawksbill Creek Agreement and the recently signed MOU with our stakeholders

Mr. Speaker, my Ministry, was created to give focused attention to Grand Bahama Island; and addressing the expiration of real property taxes and business license tax under the Hawksbill Creek Agreement, and negotiating new terms with the Grand Bahama Port Authority, and stakeholders were important mandates of my ministry, as outlined in our Charter for Governance.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased that the Cabinet committee, with the guidance of our consultants, and the wellbeing of the people of Grand Bahama as a top priority; was able to negotiate and sign a Memorandum of Understanding between the Grand Bahama Port Authority, Hutchinson Whampoa Limited, the Mediterranean Shipping Company and the Government of The Commonwealth of The Bahamas, which we believe will create the framework necessary to move Grand Bahama forward.

Mr. Speaker, before I go into some of the nuts and bolts of what this newly signed MOU means to all of us on Grand Bahama and the impact it will have on the economy, I first need to point out to the people of Grand Bahama that the main tax concessions under the Hawksbill Creek Agreement, which include customs duties, export taxes, excise taxes and certain stamp taxes, will remain fully intact until 2054, when this agreement will expire.

Mr. Speaker, the provisions that expired this year, under the Hawksbill Creek Agreement, were concessions relative to real property tax, real property levies and personal property tax, capital levies on taxes, on capital gains or capital appreciation, and a zero tax regime in respect of the earnings of the Grand Bahama Port Authority and the earnings of Port Licensees.

Prior to the date of the expiration of these concessions, **Mr. Speaker,** the Honourable Member for Centerville appointed The Hawksbill Creek Agreement Review Committee to begin the consultative process with the

licensees of the Grand Bahama Port Authority, the residents of Grand Bahama and the stakeholders; in order to make recommendations to the Cabinet's negotiating committee.

Mr. Speaker, the MOU is a very complicated document, with many moving parts; but for the sake of simplicity, and the benefit of the people of Grand Bahama, I will break it down into the following nine key points:

Point 1 – Two New GBPA Board Seats

Mr. Speaker, decisions relative to the city of Freeport and on behalf the Grand Bahama Port Authority's 2,500 registered Licensees, are made by the GBPA's Board of Directors.

Mr. Speaker, for the first time ever, the people of Grand Bahama, through representatives of the Government, will have two seats on that Board with voting rights; and will play an important role in the new corporate governance of Freeport. These representatives will be able to speak to issues of policy and decisions that affect industry, the operation

of the city, the business community and the rights of ordinary Grand Bahamians. These two board members will also have “consultative power,” meaning that they can act as mediators, in the event that the board is unable to agree on key decisions. Additionally, the two thousand five hundred (2,500) licensees of the Port will also have a seat on that board through a representative chosen from among them.

Point 2 – Regulatory Framework

Mr. Speaker, URCA is the government’s regulatory arm with oversight of cable and telecommunications; as well as utilities, inclusive of water and electricity. The Government, by way of the Freeport Byelaws, will seek to ensure the regulatory policies of the Grand Bahama Port Authority are in line with URCA’s policies, allowing the regulations in the city of Freeport to be in sync with those of the rest of The Bahamas; as it relates to the way in which these companies conduct their businesses and create their pricing structures.

Point 3 – Licensee Appeal Process

Mr. Speaker, in years past, once the Grand Bahama Port Authority made a decision regarding a licensee and their business, that decision was final. The implementation of this MOU, however, allows the Government to establish an appeals Board, consisting of members of the Government and The Grand Bahama Port Authority, which for the first time, would afford licensees to appeal any decision made by the Grand Bahama Port Authority, ranging from fee structure to business categorization.

Point 4 – Government Equity Stake in Land owned by Grand Bahama Port Authority’s Principals

Mr. Speaker, the principals of the Grand Bahama Port Authority have agreed to establish a new company, called NEWCO, to which all land owned by them and their subsidiaries will be transferred. The Government of The Bahamas will own a stake in that company; and through this arrangement, the government will have a board seat in DEVCO, as well as the new company. *Mr. Speaker*, this would allow the Government to finally have some influence in land development on

Grand Bahama, and the people of this country to finally have equity, as it relates to these matters.

Point 5 – “Grand Bahama Development Fund”

Mr. Speaker, in accordance with the agreement extension of 1993, The Grand Bahama Port Authority and the Development Company agreed to allocate funds for the specific purpose of marketing and promoting Grand Bahama Island. With the signing of this MOU, the Government will now cause for the creation of a new department in the GBPA, with its sole purpose being the marketing, promotion and advertising of Grand Bahama Island, as both a destination and as an investment haven; which include the revitalization of our local economy to attract international businesses, maintain and expand existing businesses; and support of social and infrastructural advances through concession management.

Point 6 – Reopening of West Sunrise Highway

Mr. Speaker, on June 12th, 1987, President Ronald Regan was in West Berlin in front of a wall which divided the cities of East Berlin the Sand West Berlin. The Wall divided the city and the people, causing much distress and inconvenience for traffic and commerce. In comparison, *Mr. Speaker*, in Grand Bahama, we have a road at the entrance way of the old Royal Oasis Hotel, which serves as an impediment, and has been a bone of contention for the people of Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, this administration has heard the cries of the people of Grand Bahama in this regard; and resultantly, is in active dialogue with the Grand Bahama Port Authority and the property owners, Harcourt Development.

Mr. Speaker, I am happy to report that the West Sunrise Highway will be reopened, which will create commerce at the international Bazaar and reduce the time for tourist in route to the Lucayan strip.

Point 7 – Real Property Tax

Mr. Speaker, all concessions as it relates to real property tax and real property levies remain firmly intact and unchanged for citizens of The Commonwealth of The Bahamas! In other words, these taxes will not be imposed on Bahamians.

In contrast, *Mr. Speaker*, as it relates to foreign developers and foreign based property and/or land, The Government of The Bahamas and The Grand Bahama Port Authority have agreed to offer such concessions on real property tax and real property levy on a case by case basis, which means that moving forward, this concession will no longer be automatic for existing nor new licensees. Instead, a foreign development or foreign based business will have to meet the government's requirements in terms of their plans to develop the property, and meet certain employment threshold levels.

Mr. Speaker, only after these requirements are met will such concessions be offered. Furthermore, such approval will be actively and intensely scrutinized and reviewed every five (5) years from the date of

approval to ensure that licensees are consistently following the requirements.

Point 8 – One Stop Shop

Mr. Speaker, in order for investors to start a business or development on Grand Bahama Island, they must seek approval from the Grand Bahama Port Authority first. Once that approval is given, there are various government departments that must review the application, which can be a lengthy process.

Mr. Speaker, the establishment of an effective one stop shop within my Ministry, in conjunction with the Office of the Prime Minister, will liaise with other public sector counterparts on the investors behalf, in order to ensure that the application process is a more timely and seamless one.

Mr. Speaker, this will ease the burden of conducting business on Grand Bahama Island, for international and local investors alike.

Mr. Speaker, we are currently working with our consultants to incorporate a model that would allow for a true partnership, which would establish joint governance and regular review to ensure

accountability, execution of responsibilities; and that would be in accordance with international best practices.

Point 9 – Government Reimbursement

Mr. Speaker, there has been much debate between the Grand Bahama Port Authority and the government of The Bahamas as to who spends more money in its operations of the city of Freeport. However, the government of The Bahamas holds firm to its belief that it spends more money in services rendered by its various agencies, to operate in the city of Freeport. Subsequently, under section 5.1 of the Hawksbill Creek Agreement, whenever this happens, the Government of The Bahamas is permitted to invoice the Grand Bahama Port Authority for the difference with interest. This clause was never activated by previous governments. However, during the negotiations, the Hawksbill Creek Review Committee brought this to the government's attention; and determined the amount they feel is owed to the Government. The Grand Bahama Port Authority is aware of this figure; and under the Memorandum of

Understanding, has agreed to address the government of The Bahamas concerning this important matter at an appointed time.

Mr. Speaker, the teams in the Office of the Prime Minister, my Ministry along with the cabinet subcommittee, The Hawksbill Creek Agreement Review Committee, the Principals of the Grand Bahama Port Authority, the Development Company, and the Licensees, have all worked very hard and tirelessly for months in order to arrive at this Memorandum of Understanding.

Mr. Speaker, when we first began this process, the side opposite criticized the length of time we took to make a decision, and even ridiculed us when we asked for both extensions. However, **Mr. Speaker**, I would like to remind this House and the people of Grand Bahama, that what we are presently experiencing is a result of the rushed and hushed decision made by the former FNM administration, who renewed these very same concessions, without consultation.

Mr. Speaker, the residents of Grand Bahama can almost immediately begin to see and feel the impact of this newly signed MOU.

Firstly, *Mr. Speaker*, as a result of the signing of this MOU, the Freeport Container Port will begin its two hundred and eighty million dollar (\$280,000,000.00) Phase Five expansion. In addition, *Mr. Speaker*, the exclusivity agreement that the former administration signed with Hutchison Whampoa, has been wavered, which will allow for Carnival Cruise lines to build and operate a cruise port in East Grand Bahama. Furthermore, *Mr. Speaker*, MSC has committed to open a Maritime Academy in Grand Bahama, which will train Bahamians to work on their ships around the world, and in the shipping industry; as well as to open a container repair facility on the island of Grand Bahama.

So yes, *Mr. Speaker*, while this PLP government was initially saddled with extensions and delays, and further consultations are still ongoing, I believe that the execution phase of this MOU will eventually bring about a paradigm shift, provide hundreds of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities; and breathe new life into the island of Grand Bahama.

The New Grand Bahama

Mr. Speaker, having thoroughly explained how the Hawksbill Creek Agreement will affect the residents of Grand Bahama, I now wish to take this opportunity to speak to the New Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, I often hear the talk of gloom and doom and that nothing is happening on the island of Grand Bahama. But I wish to submit to you today, *Mr. Speaker*, that my ministry, and by extension the government of The Bahamas, is working diligently to fix age old problems that have seemingly stole the magic from the magic city... and to make our island grand again!

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry for Grand Bahama was literally started from the ground up and over the past four (4) years, we have delivered on our promises to the people of Grand Bahama, as stated in on our Charter for Governance. We sought to rebuild, restore and revitalize the Island of Grand Bahama and today, I am pleased to report in this august chamber that we have been successful in our efforts and have, through the collaborative efforts with our public and private sector partners,

facilitated and delivered real, tangible results that the people of Grand Bahama can see, touch and feel. *Mr. Speaker*, we are moving forward onward!

Strategies to address Unemployment

When we came to office in 2012, *Mr. Speaker*, Grand Bahama was one year removed from a bitter internal legal battle that saw two families and the island of Grand Bahama divided and torn apart.

Mr. Speaker, businesses were closing left, right and center; and jobs were being lost at a rate much faster than jobs were becoming available.

The former FNM administration sought to patch things up just in time for a general election through it's so-called "Job-Readiness" fifty two (52) week program, which implemented in 2011. Conveniently, all pay checks, contracts, and jobs were all set to expire in May 2012, immediately after the general election, which basically left many persons on the island in a hopeless and jobless state.

Mr. Speaker, though our task was great, this PLP Government was ready for the challenge and when we assumed office, we sought to implement a new employment strategy for Grand Bahama; one that would involve partnering with our private partners to provide training and long-term sustainable employment.

Mr. Speaker, we were often criticized for only wanting to give fish, but not teach our citizenry how to fish; and for not providing opportunities for our people to take ownership of the Grand Bahamian economy. We decided, as a result, that our plans to combat unemployment on Grand Bahama had to be a combination of both allowing for the creation of jobs, and the chance for Grand Bahamians to open their own businesses.

Mr. Speaker, we not only talked about the plan, we implemented the plan and after the 52 week jobs programme came to an end, the official unemployment statistics in Grand Bahama were reduced from a devastating 19.5% in November, 2012 to 14.2% in November, 2015.

Mr. Speaker, the extension of duty free concessions to East Grand Bahama, the revamped Fresh Start Program, The National Training Agency, and the Grand Bahama Shipyard's Employment Program are all government initiatives that have helped to place a dent in the unemployment statistics and are bringing relief right now to Grand Bahamians. I expect that these figures will further decrease, as this administration has proposed to incorporate a training and employment clause in all investors' Heads of Agreement moving forward.

Mr. Speaker, under this PLP administration, we are moving forward onward, and getting stronger.

Fishing Hole Road

Mr. Speaker, for many years, the residents of Grand Bahama, specifically those in West Grand Bahama have cried out for help and for something to be done about the Fishing Hole Road; which often floods during adverse weather conditions.

Mr. Speaker, this PLP Government has listened to the people and since last December, when we signed a six point five million dollar (\$6,5000,000.00) contract for the new Fishing Hole Road Causeway, the foundation has been laid, the construction company is working, and the project will be completed on time and within budget.

Mr. Speaker, we are moving forward onward; and getting stronger

Fire Station

Mr. Speaker, since 2004, we have not had a Fire Station on the island of Grand Bahama. During our last term in office, plans were in motion to rebuild the fire station. Unfortunately, we were voted out of office in 2007, and for five consecutive years, no movement was made in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, eleven (11) years later, the administration who truly cares for the people of Grand Bahama, entered into a six point two million dollar (\$6,200,000.00) dollar contract with Patrick McDonald

Construction Company to build not a new fire station on Grand Bahama Island.

Mr. Speaker, this new facility will include a two-storey 16,600-square-foot administrative building, inclusive of a reception area and public restrooms, a training room, locker room, exercise room, dining room and kitchen, a dormitory for both male and female police fire fighters, bathrooms, showers, a common laundry room, and a first aid room among other features. It will also include a single storey complex that will house four fire trucks, and storage for other firefighting equipment. Additionally, a number of other recreational facilities are being constructed on site, making the new station one of the finest and most modern in the region.

Mr. Speaker, I am also able to report to this honourable house that I have been informed the project will be completed on budget and before time. *Mr. Speaker*, we are moving forward onward; and getting stronger

Water Project in East and West Grand Bahama

I now wish to speak to another hallmark accomplishment of my time in office, *Mr. Speaker*; and that is the water projects in East and West Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, as noted in the Charter for Governance, this administration recognizes the peculiar hardship faced by the people of East and West Grand, and has determined to positively impact the lives of these persons.

Mr. Speaker, for decades, residents of some sections of West Grand Bahama, and all of East Grand Bahama have had to rely on fresh water wells in order to access water. Although the water is of a good quality, the maintenance of their pumps, over time, has proven to be costly, as the wear and tear and unexpected malfunction, has proven to be burdensome.

Mr. Speaker, the initial trenching and laying of pipes is near complete in the Holmes Rock area of West Grand Bahama, Section C into Section B;

after which, pressure testing will commence; after which, all residents will be connected to the service line, upon successful application.

Mr. Speaker, the final laying of pipes and pressure testing will be complete within the next three to three and half (3 to 3 – ½) weeks.

Mr. Speaker, we are doing the same in East Grand Bahama. The contract for these works has already been awarded; and the first phase will be from High Rock to Bevans' Town.

Mr. Speaker, we are moving forward onward, and are stronger!

Mr. Speaker, additionally in High Rock, East Grand Bahama, the current cemetery has reached full capacity, and there is need for expansion.

Mr. Speaker, I am happy to report that this government will be constructing a new cemetery for the High Rock Community. The architectural plans have already been rendered, contract awarded, and the work has already begun.

Mr. Speaker, I wish, with your leave, to thank Rev. John Pinder for his willingness to work with the Government by granting approval to use

piece of his land in order for us to create an access road to the new cemetery.

Mr. Speaker, East Grand Bahama is moving forward onward, and getting stronger!

NHI and Advancement of Healthcare

Mr. Speaker, health and wellness are required for personal success and social wellbeing; and as the cliché states, the health of the nation is the wealth of the nation.

Mr. Speaker, building a healthier Bahamas is a core element of this administration's agenda, as clearly outlined in our charter of governance. In order for us to create a healthier Bahamas, we must ensure that every Bahamian has equitable access to modern health care, both now and for generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, the ultimate goal of NHI Bahamas is to ensure that universal health coverage is extended to all Bahamians.

Mr. Speaker, I am a firm believer that no one should be denied health care coverage because of preexisting illnesses or the inability to pay.

This principle is a fundamental criteria of universal health care; and in our plan, NHI will guarantee coverage regardless of the diagnosis, or the amount of care required.

Mr. Speaker, we have already articulated that NHI will be implemented in stages; with the first being universal primary health care. There will be no contributions or copayments during the initial rollout while the much needed health care strengthening activities will be ongoing throughout the country.

Mr. Speaker, it is important to point out that specialist procedures and care will be covered by a special emergency fund that would be put in place by the government to manage some of these essential services; and when NHI coverage expands, additional secondary and tertiary care services would be included.

Mr. Speaker, this administration remains committed to the launch of NHI and universal primary health care; and everyday we get closer to this feat.

Mr. Speaker, it is safe to say that we are nearly ready for the launch of the universal primary healthcare component of National Health Insurance throughout Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, as I would've previously mentioned in this honorable house, as part of the Public Hospital Authority's ongoing health system strengthening program, all outlying clinics on Grand Bahama and Sweeting's Cay have been renovated; with the exception of the West End Clinic, which is presently undergoing extensive renovations.

Mr. Speaker, on Thursday, March 3rd, a contract in excess of one million dollars (\$1,000,000.00) was signed for the renovation and upgrades of the West End Community Clinic. These upgrades, which are set to be complete in September, 2016, will ensure that care is delivered at a highest quality and in a competent manner to better serve the needs of residents in that area.

Mr. Speaker, this administration has also set eleven million dollars (\$11,000,000.00) aside for the renovation of the Rand Memorial

Hospital, while the architectural drawings for the new Freeport Community Clinic are being completed.

Mr. Speaker, two (2) of the five contracts for upgrades at the Rand Memorial Hospital are presently out to tender; one for the renovation for the cafeteria/kitchen and the other for the construction of a new corridor connecting the existing Rand Memorial Hospital to the new kitchen/cafeteria on the old Freeport Inn Site. The process will be completed on June 25th; after which, the contract will be awarded and construction will commence.

Mr. Speaker, as I would have previously stated in this honourable place, the government of The Bahamas engaged GesaWorld USA as the key health planning consultant for the upgrade of the original Dorsett Report and to create a master plan for health care on Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased that we have reached a new phase in our preparations for the expansion and redevelopment of healthcare delivery for the island of Grand Bahama; and the entire northern region. As part

of the master planning for Grand Bahama, we are currently in the advanced planning stage of the establishment and construction of the first ever Community Clinic in the City of Freeport as Phase 1 of the New Rand Memorial Hospital; which will be located on the new green field site, on East Sunrise Highway. This new facility will be about sixty two thousand (62,000) sq. ft., and offer the very best in world class health care that this region has ever seen. The architectural renderings for this facility are presently being completed by The Beck Group out of Houston Texas, and the local firm Bruce Lafleur Architects.

Mr. Speaker, we have made tremendous progress as it relates to improving the overall healthcare system on the Island of Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, we are moving forward onward, and getting stronger.

Environment and Health Risk Assessment of Lewis Yard & Pinder's Point

Mr. Speaker, as I would've mentioned in the midterm debate, PAHO/WHO were contracted by the government of The Bahamas to

complete an Environment and Health Risk Assessment of Lewis Yard, Pinder's Point and the surrounding settlements, to determine, if any, the effects of exposure to hazardous chemicals, to the environment and health of individuals in the residential areas, which border the Freeport Industrial Park, on Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, this study was concluded in December, 2015; and I am happy to report to this house that after years of speculation, it has been scientifically proven by this independent assessment that there are NO environmental and health risk factors associated with living in close proximity to the industrial companies.

Nevertheless, *Mr. Speaker*, there were two primary recommendations made in this report; and I am satisfied that my ministry is making significant strides to ensure that each is carried out.

Mr. Speaker, the first recommendations was for an independently run and year-round environmental monitoring system to be put in place. As a result, my ministry with the advice of our consultants sought the

services of an international company from the Netherlands called Common Invent Ltd, who provided a proposal for the installation and commissioning of an eNose odor monitoring network, which will monitor incidental releases, create an early warning system for accidental spills, and trace the source of incidental emissions and spills.

Mr. Speaker, this proposal has been approved by the government; and the hardware, which include twenty (20) solar powered and four (4) wind vanes will arrive on island at the end of this month. These electronic noses and wind vanes will be mounted on existing utility poles in the settlements bordering the Freeport Industrial park; and will provide continuous, independent air quality monitoring of the settlements bordering the industrial park.

Mr. Speaker, this state of the art eNose monitoring network, will offer a powerful management tool for a pro-active odor, health and safety control for the responsible authorities, which include the government of the Bahamas, the Department of Environmental Health, and the Environmental Department of the Grand Bahama Port Authority.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to reiterate one of the conclusions of the report, which states that during the monitoring period, and based on air and water sampling in the Pinder's point Lewis Yard and surrounding areas, **no** evidence was found of harmful chemical exposure on a day to day basis in the affected residential areas.

Nevertheless, *Mr. Speaker*, the second recommendation, by PAHO/WHO was for a professional safety assessment, relative to the potential threat of fires, quakes, hurricanes, and explosions, to communities of Pinder's Point and Lewis Yard and the surrounding areas to be performed; to determine if relocation of residents is a necessity.

Mr. Speaker, I am also pleased to report to this honorable house that at present, The Antea Group, an international engineering and environmental consulting firm specializing in full-service solutions in the fields of environment, infrastructure, urban planning and water, is finalizing a detailed proposal for an independent safety assessment,

which should begin shortly, and be completed before the end of this year.

Mr. Speaker, I wish, through you, to once again appeal to the residents of Pinder's Point, Lewis Yard and the surrounding areas, for their full support during this second and final phase of the assessment, which will finally address the question of possible relocation; and to reassure them that this administration is investing much time, effort and resources to ensure that you are and remain safe and healthy.

Mr. Speaker, with your leave sir, I wish at this time, to table PAHO/WHO's final Report on the Environmental and Health Risk Assessment; and to thank all of our consultants, and our local team, who worked tirelessly on this important project.

The Grand Bahama Sports Complex

Mr. Speaker, Former NCAA Sooners Superstar Buddy Hield hailed from the island of Grand Bahama; and with training and hard work has

become an international success. Such is also the case with Jonquel Jones who was recently drafted by the Connecticut Sun's team of the WNBA; as well as our Golden Nights Demetrius Pinder and Michael Matthieu.

Mr. Speaker, there is no doubt that the Island of Grand Bahama has a record of success as it relates to producing world class athletes.

However, as promised in our Charter for Governance, we must ensure that Grand Bahama has adequate sporting facilities and equipment in all of the nationally recognized core sports, so that every athlete will have an opportunity to develop their talent to their full potential.

That is why, *Mr. Speaker*, I am pleased to report that a contract has been awarded and work is presently being done to upgrade The Grand Bahama Sports Complex. These upgrades will better assist in the overall development of young Grand Bahamians in the area of sports, as well as further solidify Grand Bahama as a prime location for hosting international sporting events.

Furthermore, *Mr. Speaker*, five additional playing fields are being created in preparation for the Flag Football World Championships, which will be held on Grand Bahama Island in September of this year.

Mr. Speaker, we are moving forward, onward and getting stronger.

Government Buildings

Mr. Speaker, upon coming to office, this Administration was met with the challenges of government buildings that were in poor conditions, due to a lack of maintenance by the previous administration. Nevertheless,

Mr. Speaker, this administration promised in our Charter of Governance to improve government office accommodations; and we were up for the challenge.

Mr. Speaker, I am able to report that the contract has been awarded and work is presenting being done on both the interior and exterior of the Garnet Levarity Justice Centre, and work on The Freeport Post Office will begin shortly. The materials needed to ensure both facilities are repaired have been special ordered, and once on island will be installed.

Additionally, *Mr. Speaker*, I am pleased to report that construction has been completed and a new storage facility is now open; which will facilitate better book keeping, along with an improved work flow at each of the Government offices housed in the CA Smith Building.

Secondary School in West Grand Bahama

Mr. Speaker, for long time, there has been a cry on Grand Bahama that the West, which is the largest settlement in The Bahamas, has been neglected.

Mr. Speaker, the previous Government allowed these cries to fall on deaf ears and for five long years did nothing to address the need for infrastructural upgrades and the demands of this growing population.

Nevertheless, *Mr. Speaker*, this administration is taking the necessary action to ensure that the needs of the community of West Grand Bahama are met.

Mr. Speaker, I am able to report to this honorable house that the architectural plans for this new school have been approved by the Ministry of Education, a contract has been awarded and we will be breaking ground in two weeks for a new secondary school.

Mr. Speaker, in just four (4) years we have provided real, long term solutions to age old problems while at the same time implementing new policies and programs, that spurring economic growth, and making life better for thousands of Grand Bahamians.

Mr. Speaker, I have spoken to real results, delivered by an administration that cares about the people of Grand Bahama, and is committed to moving forward and onward to a stronger Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker, the people of Grand Bahama must not forget that the former FNM administration, brought about no meaningful developments to Grand Bahama in their last term in office. They must not forget that under the former administration's watch, unemployment levels increased, despite their fifty two (52) week program. They must never forget that Grand Bahama was sorely and intentionally neglected

because of, in the words of the former Member for North Abaco, his grievances with one man!

But *Mr. Speaker*, Grand Bahama is moving forward onward and we are getting stronger.

Mr. Speaker, in my hand is a comprehensive list of completed and ongoing projects, as well as those in the pipeline for Grand Bahama; which have and are being facilitated by the government of the Bahamas; in collaboration with other ministries and our private sector partners.

Mr. Speaker, with your permission, I would like to hand out these booklets, which will demonstrate this administration's performance from 2012 – 2016. An electronic copy of this booklet of accomplishments can be found on the Facebook page of Grand Bahama Revitalization or The Ministry for Grand Bahama.

Before I take my seat, **Mr. Speaker**, I wish to thank the Honourable Member for Centerville for giving me a once in a lifetime opportunity to execute this administration's vision for Grand Bahama Island.

Mr. Speaker, the new Grand Bahama is one that is filled with hope, optimism and opportunity and despite the challenges we currently face with youth unemployment, there is no question that present state of Grand Bahama is indeed better than we meet it in 2012. Because of the combined efforts of my ministry, my cabinet colleagues and our private sector partners, the future of Grand Bahama is better, brighter and stronger.

Mr. Speaker, Pineridge supports the 2016-2017 budget.