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| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Manitoba | 39e | 5e | Discours sur le Budget | 12 avril 2011 | Rosann Wowchuk | Ministre des Finances | New Democratic Party of Manitoba |

Mr. Speaker, I am proud to present Budget 2011, which builds on Manitoba's momentum by focusing on the priorities of Manitoba families.

      During this winter we began preparations to address the serious challenges of spring flooding, and Manitobans have come together to face this immense challenge. This past weekend has tested our preparedness, and we will continue to work with all communities and all partners to develop long-term solutions as the situation evolves.

      When I introduced last year's budget, our province was threatened by the worst global economic downturn since the Second World War. And we had a choice to make. We could have absorbed the effects of the global recession all at once, with major cuts to health care, education, public safety and at the risk of derailing economic recovery. Although some voices urged us to travel down this path, we chose a different way. We rejected the calls to cut public services and we refused to let thousands of Manitobans lose their jobs. Instead, Mr. Speaker, we chose to put families first by protecting jobs and protecting services.

      Now a year later and thanks to the hard work and the spirit of Manitobans, our province's strong, steady recovery from the economic downturn is well under way. Mr. Speaker, over the past year, Manitoba has had the lowest unemployment rates in any of the provinces in this country.

      Over the past decade, Manitoba has developed a balanced and responsible approach to taxation. It includes a combination of reducing taxes and implementing tax credits. Mr. Speaker, for the 12th consecutive year, we will not increase major business or personal taxes.

      The effects of our stimulus program went beyond the public sector. In fact, Manitobans' private firms accounted for creation of four out of five jobs since the onset of the recession. We have achieved all this while protecting and enhancing the priorities Manitoba families: health care, infrastructure, education, water quality and public safety. It is this–it was this focus that allowed us to achieve what *Maclean's* magazine refers to as the Manitoba miracle. Last year we introduced the plan and the plan is working.

      Budget 2011 builds on these positive results and continues to put families first. Manitobans tell us they are optimistic about the future and we share their optimism. Perhaps the best reason is for Manitoba's population–that Manitoba's population is growing and getting younger. This is a major positive change since October, 1999. Manitoba's population has grown by more than a hundred thousand people.

      More young people than ever before are choosing to build their future here in Manitoba. They want the best possible health care available when they need it, and an excellent education and training opportunities to ensure the success of their children. They want strong–they want a strong, dynamic economy where entrepreneurs with new ideas create rewarding jobs. They want us to protect our water and natural heritage so future generations can enjoy them as we enjoy them today. They want and they deserve to know that they are safe in their homes and in their communities. They want a high quality of   life with good roads, world-class amenities and   modern recreational opportunities, and they want lower taxes and a cost of living that remains strong–that remains among the most affordable in Canada.

      These are the priorities of Manitoba families, Mr. Speaker, and Budget 2011 delivers on those priorities. Manitoba's economic recovery is steady and over our five-year plan–and our five-year plan is delivering positive results.

      Manitoba's future is bright, we–but we will not be complacent. The global economy is recovering but remains fragile. Our largest international trading partner, the United States, faces major challenges of its own. Now is not the time to risk everything we've built together. Our plan is working and there is still more to do.

      Like the federal government and other provincial governments, we chose to run a deficit to deal with the global recession. Our priority was to protect jobs and front-line services. Our decade of balanced budgets put Manitoba in a strong place to address the economic downturn. In the first year of our five-year plan, we took measured actions to manage government spending, reduce debt and restore budgetary balance. Despite ongoing economic challenges, we are on track to return to surplus by Budget 2014. This will help us keep Manitoba as one of the most affordable places in the country to live, work and raise a family.

      Budget 2011 continues to invest in new infrastructure projects that will support employment and enhance our quality of life. A total of $1.8 billion is dedicated to infrastructure and capital assets renewal this year. The Len Evans Centre of Trade and Technology in Brandon opened last fall. Work is under way on the expansion of the University College of the North in The Pas, and construction will soon begin on the new campus in Thompson.

      Since 1999 we have made significant investments in Manitoba's hospitals and personal care homes. Budget 2011 continues to invest in health-care facilities, including the first-in-Canada mental-health crisis stabilization centre; a hospital expansion in Ste. Anne; new and expanding EMS services in Flin Flon, Pine Falls, Oakbank, Springfield, La Broquerie, Stonewall and Vita; a new youth crisis response centre in Thompson and a groundbreaking later this year for a new hospital in Selkirk.

      After just two years we have added close to 700 social and affordable housing units towards our five‑year goal of 1,500. Affordable housing remains an important part of our infrastructure plan this year. We are continuing to support home ownership in    older neighbourhoods and extending tax incremental financing to support residential housing developments in downtown Winnipeg.

      Strong transportation links help drive economic growth. This year marks the fifth year of our $4 billion 10-year plan commitment to renewal of our highways. We will introduce a new plan to guide our investments for the next five years. A number of projects on highways and bridges around the province will get under way this year, including more than $520 million on roads and additional funding for municipal bridges projects. We will continue to partner with the City of Winnipeg on their priority streets, such as Plessis Road.

      A number of companies have announced new business or expansion plans at CentrePort Canada over the past year. Construction of a $212-million expressway are well under way with new investments this year. The multiyear East Side Transportation Initiative will result in an all-season road network connecting several First Nation communities on the east side of Lake Winnipeg. Agreements signed so far will provide an estimated $47 million in jobs, training and economic opportunities for 12 east-side communities.

      This year we will almost double funding for capital investments in water management, including drainage, dams, control structures, flood protection, culvert replacement and conservation district projects, particularly in a high needed area such as the Interlake.

      Budget 2011 invests in education at all levels to support our youth. Mr. Speaker, our high school graduation rate climbed to 82.7 per cent in 2010. This builds on 10 years of success, with rates up by more than 14 per cent from 2001. To build on this success, we are increasing financial support for schools. This includes a guaranteed increase of 2.2  per cent to all school divisions. We are also expanding the successful community schools program.

      We recently announced $94.2-million investment in public school capital projects to address priorities such as planning new schools and building gymnasiums and child-care facilities. Some of the projects include a new elementary school for Amber Trail in the Seven Oaks School Division; plans for a new elementary school at Sage Creek; continued work and design for the construction of middle schools in La Broquerie and Steinbach, and high school projects in Winkler and Steinbach; the replacement of the Woodlands School; and $3 million for projects to improve accessibility for students with disabilities.

      Since 1999, the Education Property Tax Credit has been increased from $250 to $650. Budget 2011 includes another increase, from $650 to $700, which will save Manitoba families an estimated $16 million annually.

      The Farmland School Tax Rebate will rise from 75 per cent to 80 per cent, providing a total of $35.5 million in property tax relief for thousands of Manitoba farm families.

      We are working with universities and colleges to improve completion times and graduation rates, strengthening the quality of the program, making it easier for students to transfer credits between institutes and programs and make post-secondary education more accessible. Mr. Speaker, our government has increased overall funding for post-secondary education by more than 80 per cent over the past 11 years.

      This year we have developed a multiyear funding arrangement for universities, which will increase operating grants by 5 per cent per year for the next three years. Manitoba tuition fees remain amongst the lowest in the country, and we are introducing a new policy to hold tuition increases to the rate of inflation at universities. As well, tuition fees will increase by $100 per year at colleges this year. Graduates will benefit from an estimated $26 million in rebates through the Manitoba Tuition Fee Income Tax Rebate in 2011.

      Budget 2011 will also increase operating grants for colleges, increase the Manitoba Bursary Fund and increase the number of graduate scholarships available at universities. We also plan to update the legislation for the Collège universitaire de Saint‑Boniface in this upcoming year. Funding will be provided to develop a plan for the third phase of the construction of Assiniboine Community College new campus.

      Over the last several years, our government has expended–expanded the technical training capacity of post-secondary institutes to better support apprentices and in turn produce a highly skilled labour force. We are adding hundreds of new seats this year, and are on target to meet our commitment to add 4,000 new apprenticeship seats.

      We will also partner with the federal government and Island Lake First Nations and other interested stakeholders to develop apprenticeship training for  First Nations residents to retrofit homes for improved water and sewer infrastructure. To help apprentices remain in their home community in rural and northern areas, we will create new online apprenticeship training programs.

      Other opportunities to help develop the skills for jobs amongst our youth include increasing investment in adult learning centres and literacy programs, adding funds to the Bright Futures program, enhancing job opportunities through our Youth Job Corps, adding funds to the successful Green Team program, investing in the new Manitoba mentorship–mentors program that was recommended by the Premier's Economic Advisory Council.

      We will continue to enhance supports to help Manitoba innovators and entrepreneurs create good jobs and build our economy. Based on the recommendations from the Manitoba Innovation Council, we are introducing a new five-year $30‑million program to support business innovation. This will help entrepreneurs and businesses create new ideas, new products, new markets and new jobs.

      We are also keeping our commitment to improve the Research and Development Tax Credit and increase funding to the Manitoba Research and Innovation Fund. A newly formed Council on International Trade will work to increase the number of Manitoba exporters, help Manitoba firms diversify, find new markets abroad and attract new investments. The council will begin their work by targeting emerging markets such as Brazil, Russia, India and China.

      We are working with the private sector to explore joining the World Trade Centers Association, which will provide access to the association's global network of 323 locations in 96 countries.

      We are supporting the Centre for Manufacturing Excellence, designed to support manufacturers' building to become competitive in the global market.

      To streamline government services, we are transferring the Mechanical and Engineering Branch of Manitoba Labour and Immigration to the Office of the Fire Commissioner. To improve efficiency and to reduce costs we will introduce new technology to support paperless meetings of Cabinet and other committees.

      Today, 360 communities representing 90 per cent of Manitoba's population have access to high-speed Internet and 66 new communities will be connected by the end of this year. This year we will also introduce a number of initiatives that will help Manitoba families and businesses get services that they want and need more quickly. These include more online services, such as expanding the online child-care registry, introducing direct deposits for maintenance support, applying for student loans and creating a financial literacy resource website.

      We are also making it easier for businesses to get the information and support that they need from government. According to the most recent statistics from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, costs of complying with regulations for small businesses in Manitoba is amongst the lowest in the country.

      We have already introduced a number of initiatives, such as the innovative TAXcess service. And this year we are implementing additional online business and employment services, a single-window approach for innovation funding, more BizPaL online services for Manitoba business and red-tape reduction measures for the non-profit organizations.

      Manitoba families expect timely, high-quality health care close to home. They also expect their government to eliminate waste and inefficiencies in the health–in health-care administration and direct that funding to front-line care. During the last recession in the '90s, decisions were made to implement devastating cuts to front-line health care while a new level of health-care bureaucracy was created. The province saw a net loss of more than a hundred doctors and 1,500 nurses while 13 new–13 regional health authorities were created. Mr. Speaker, we stand firmly against cuts to front-line services.

      We see innovation as the key to improving and sustaining our universal health-care system. Since 1999 we have reduced the number of regional health authorities from 13 to 11, improved efficiencies and eliminated administrative waste, all of which have helped the province see a net gain of more than 400 doctors and 2,500 nurses.

      Over the past several years we have implemented numerous innovative strategies designed to improve services for patients while also increasing efficiency in the system. Building on this important work, more innovative initiatives will be implemented this year, including the release time for care pilot project which helps increase the time nurses can spend with patients, and expanding the successful Advanced Access initiative to help more patients get to–an appointment sooner.

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      These efforts are paying off, saving an estimated $50 million last year in spending, which has been reinvested in improving front-line care for patients and families. In fact, the Canadian Institute for Health Information reports that Manitoba has the third most cost-effective in-patient care and the third lowest hospital administration costs in Canada.

      Corporate spending at the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority is now below 3 per cent of its total budget, and strict guidelines for all regional health authorities will be introduced in legislation to cap corporate spending, strengthen accountability and ensure public funding is directed to front-line services.

      Investing in Manitoba's green economy helps   ensure a healthy environment and strong opportunities for the future.

      We are introducing the Manitoba Climate Change Investment Program, which allows building owners and companies to apply for grant funding to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in their operations.

      Manitoba is renewing its agreement with the International Institute for Sustainable Development, and we are maintaining our ongoing commitment to the Lake Winnipeg Action Plan to restore the health of Lake Winnipeg and the large and small marshes across the province.

      We introduced the Trees for Tomorrow program as part of the Manitoba government's action plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We are expanding this program and will plant an additional one million trees, bringing our total to six million trees.

      Our abundance of clean energy presents an opportunity for Manitobans to benefit from affordable emission-free electrical transportation. In partnership with the industry, we will implement an electric vehicle strategy that will enable Manitoba to become an early adopter of emerging technologies.

      To restore the moose population and to bring it to sustainable numbers, we are investing in the moose population restoration program.

      Manitobans have raised concern about beaver dams causing flooding and damage in roads and fields. This spring, we will be introducing a project to address this concern.

      Building Urban Industries for Local Development, or BUILD, in Winnipeg and Brandon Energy Efficiency Program, or BEEP, both work to lower utility bills while training workers in the construction industry. To date this work has led to lower utility bills in 6,000 Manitoba housing units.

      Building on this success, we will continue to partner with these organizations to work on the rest of the provincial funding–provincially funded housing units.

      Manitoba Hydro's Lower Income Energy Efficiency program has already been successful by reinsulating more than 2,200 homes across the province, saving more than a million dollars in energy building. Now Manitoba Hydro will work with the William Whyte neighbourhood to reinsulate homes in central Winnipeg.

      Manitoba continues to be committed to developing renewable energy resources. The province's largest wind farm, St. Joseph, has just opened and the new hydroelectric dam in Wuskwatim will be online later this year.

      As announced in Budget 2008, coal will be subject to a new emissions tax, further reducing Manitoba's carbon footprint, beginning on January 1st, 2012. A new biomass support program will use the revenue from the tax to provide grants to coal users who switch to biomass, provide targeted support to biomass producers and provide new funds for research and development.

      This year the Green Energy Equipment Tax Credit for geothermal heating systems will be increased from 10 per cent to 15 per cent effective for installation after April 12th, 2011.

      Our natural areas are some of the most important–our most important resources. To ensure more Manitobans visit our parks, entry will once again be free in 2011.

      We are also introducing a five-year plan for   exciting new capital projects–infrastructure projects–in our parks across the province, including at Birds Hill Park. Further funding is being directed to support operating costs as well as upgrading and maintaining parks.

      This year, we are investing in staff and operating costs to open a new full-service, 120-site campground at Winnipeg Beach Provincial Park. We are also making investments to service and operate campgrounds at Rivers, Wellman Lake and Childs Lakes.

      Other initiatives include developing cottage lots at the Black–with Black River First Nation; expanding several wildlife management areas to mark the 50th anniversary of the creation of wildlife management areas; supporting the finalization of the UNESCO heritage park–World Heritage Site nomination and submission to Parks Canada to protect the boreal forest in partnership with First Nations; and investing in the operations on the Waabanong Anishinaabe Interpretive Centre at the Hollow Water First Nation.

      Additional funds will be directed–will be made available to strengthen the capacity of the Office of Drinking Water.

      We are committed to supporting farmers and producers, especially in what could be a very challenging year. Rural Economic Development Initiative funds will be maintained this year to support a wide range of projects that help rural communities seize new opportunities for economic growth. The expansion of the Food Development Centre will create a full-service facility that will help producers, processors and entrepreneurs start new businesses. We are increasing compensation from 80 to 90 per cent for wildlife damage for farmers who suffer because of wildlife. We are also working to develop a range of livestock insurance programs to support producers. Additional resources will be committed to further increase funding for production insurance, to make sure producers can deal with excess moisture or other potential hazards.

      History has shown us that severe cuts to core services are reckless and would only cost more later. Mr. Speaker, we will not cut services that Manitoba families value. Budget 2011 continues to protect and strengthen those services. Budget 2011 supports our comprehensive plan to move health care forward and strengthen our health-care system. It is a top priority for us for a simple reason: it is a top priority for Manitobans.

      One of the most important things we can do is support healthy families. Good nutrition is an important part of healthy living. This year we are investing in a number of programs that support good food choices, including: expanding the successful Farm to School Healthy Choice fundraising program; maintaining support for a dietary hotline; increasing funding for the Northern Healthy Food Initiative; and launching a new program that will help Manitobans identify locally grown products in stores and markets more easily.

      Earlier this year, we announced new supports for chronic disease prevention, including a new tobacco reduction strategy. This year we are increasing tobacco taxes by 2 cents a cigarette, while adding Pharmacare coverage for some smoke cessation aids to support Manitobans who want to quit.

      Another way for people to stay healthy is to have  timely access to a family doctor and primary health-care teams, including nurse practitioners. By 2015, every Manitoban who wants a family doctor will have a family doctor.

      Budget 2011 moves Manitoba forward by implementing several new initiatives, including: opening quick–five quick-care clinics where nurse practitioners will offer some common medical services; introducing a mobile primary care unit to offer routine care for northern and rural residents where they live; establishing primary care workers, where teams of health professionals deliver and co‑ordinate health services with patients and families; and providing funding for physicians to implement electronic medical records to better serve their patients. Construction of three Winnipeg projects, Access St. James, Access north west and a new clinic in the Weston-Brooklands area will begin this year. Together, these initiatives will provide Manitobans with improved access to health care as well as reduce reliance on emergency rooms in hospitals.

      To support increasing the number of doctors and nurses in Manitoba, we are increasing resources for the Aboriginal Medical Student Scholarship Program, providing incentives to encouraging medical students to work in under-serviced areas of the province after they graduate, and providing permanent and stable annual funding for the nurse recruitment and retention fund.

      Bringing health care closer to home for families across the province is a top priority. Over the past decade, we have seen–the past decade has seen diagnostic equipment, dialysis units, cancer service and surgical services added to sites in rural and northern Manitoba. New dialysis units will be opened or–have opened or will open this year in Russell, in Gimli, in Berens River and near Peguis First Nation.

      Budget 2011 provides funding for new cataracts, a new cataract surgery program in Swan River, which will complement existing sites in Brandon, Winnipeg, Portage la Prairie and Minnedosa.

      Cancer treatment has been–has seen major improvements since 1999. Manitoba now has the fastest access to radiation therapy in the nation. Radiation therapy will soon be available outside of Winnipeg for the first time when Western Manitoba Cancer Centre opens this spring in Brandon. Screening programs have been produced or expanded to help detect cancer earlier and the budget for cancer drugs has been more than doubled. We will make further investments in our cancer system to ensure quality care.

      Since 1999–in–pardon me. In 1999, four MRI machines in Winnipeg performed just more than 10,600 scans. In 2010, eight MRI machines located across the province performed 56,700. This is an increase of 434 per cent in just 12 years.

      We have also seen an increase in CT scans, moving from 100,400 scans in 2003 to 157,100 scans in 1999 after investments in eight additional machines, many in rural and northern communities; first time ever.

      Budget 2011 provides funds for new and replacement diagnostic equipment. This year we will see a number of milestones in caring for mothers and babies, and they include: the opening of a new birthing centre in south Winnipeg; the start of construction of a new women's hospital; planning for a 10-bed hospital in Notre Dame de Lourdes which will include a birthing facility; the opening of an expanded maternity ward in St. Boniface General Hospital; and the addition–and additional funding for the neo-natal intensive care unit capacity.

      Ensuring universal health care is not only accessible, but affordable is a priority. Budget 2011 continues to protect Manitobans from rising drug costs. As part of our five-year plan, Pharmacare deductibles will only rise at the rate of inflation. We will invest additional funds in the provincial drug program to ensure that 100 per cent of all eligible drug costs are covered–remain covered above the deductible. Fees are being eliminated on soft, foldable lens used in the––used for cataract surgery, and coverage will be added for pediatric insulin pumps.

      Budget 2011 includes a number of initiatives for emergency services, such as dedicated pharmacists in the province's busiest emergency departments, an expanded emergency department at Grace Hospital, an expansion and redevelopment at 'Bethesnal' hospital in Steinbach's emergency unit, and plans for a new emergency department in Dauphin.

      Over the past 11 years we have made a number of changes to renew our mental health system. This year we are introducing a new strategic plan to guide our work, and we will provide additional funds for several projects, including working with the courts to establish a mental health court. We are working also–work is also beginning on the redevelopment of the River Point Centre in Winnipeg, which will provide a range of addiction and mental health services through collaboration with a number of community organizations.

      Budget 2011 continues to focus on services for families, children and seniors. We are establishing a children's victim centre to support children who have been abused, and investigating in resources to address domestic violence, sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

      We are also providing more support for families, including additional funding to help people with intellectual disabilities live in their community, for children with autism and to address fetal alcohol 'syndom' disorder in Manitoba.

      Manitoba leads the country in reducing poverty rates for families with children. Between 2000 and 2008 the poverty rate for families with children, in Manitoba, declined by 44 per cent, lifting 19,000 children out of poverty. But there is still more to do. We are making further investments in poverty reduction, further–by including further increases to help low-income families pay their rent, a funding increase to–of 1 per cent to social services agencies and new outreach supports for the West Central Women's Resource Centre.

      Some neighbourhoods have significant need for child-care services, but schools do not have surplus space. School divisions can now apply for funding to build child-care centres on existing school property. Manitoba families need child-care spaces that provide quality care. Under the Family Choices program we are funding 2,100 new spaces, as well as additional 400 enhanced nursery spaces. Further efforts will be made to support the stability of the early childhood educator workplace.

      Thousands of Manitobans are now part of the sandwich generation, taking care of both their parents and their children. Budget 2011 provides support for these dedicated, caring Manitobans. The Primary Caregiver Tax Credit is a one-of-a-kind provincial tax credit that provides recognition and financial support to individuals who serve as voluntary caregivers. To further support these generous caregivers, we are increasing the maximum credit by 25 per cent to a maximum of $1,275.

      We are also expanding the successful SafetyAid program in south-central and southwestern Manitoba. As Manitobans grow older, some need–may need more specific, specialized care that their–than their families can provide. We are focusing and providing a wide range of long-term care services, and we recently announced a renewal of our long-term care plan. This includes a pilot project called HomeSafe that will provide medical care in the home for people with fragile health so they do not have to be admitted into the hospital.

      Budget 2011 also includes additional funds for more staff at all personal care homes, a capital expansion of the Holy Family personal care home in Winnipeg, a new personal care home in Lac du Bonnet, and increased dollars for home care.

      All Manitobans are entitled to feel secure in their homes and communities, and we are investing in   initiatives to ensure the safety of all Manitobans. Mr. Speaker, we met–we'll meet our four-year commitment to add a hundred police officer positions to the two–for a total of 255 new officers since 1999. This year we are funding 17 new officers in the city of Winnipeg and providing additional resources for RCMP in rural and northern Manitoba. We are also funding 50 per cent of the cost of hiring 50 new cadets in Winnipeg. An additional 10 prosecutors and seven support staff will also be hired this year. We are also investing in enhancing the security of correctional staff.

      Construction continues on the new women's correctional facility and the expansion of the Milner Ridge Correctional facility. Budget 2011 includes an increase of provincial funding for Legal Aid, and we are also increasing resources to ensure The Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods Act–to enforce The Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods Act, which has supported the shutdown of about 500 drug dens.

      We will continue to invest in crime prevention initiatives. Budget 2011 includes funding to support the expansion of the innovative Gang Response and Suppression Program and the successful COACH project in Winnipeg School Division to help children at risk of dropping out of school. We are investing in the Gang Awareness for Parents project that helps parents and caregivers and other adults identify the risk of–signs of gang innovation.

      Manitoba provides some of the strongest support for arts and culture in Canada, and our recreational and culture opportunities enriched our quality of life. Two new libraries will be established in Manitoba this year, and we will provide funding to support these important projects. We are sustaining funding for the cultural community, including museums, concert halls, and other valuable institutes. We are also making new investments to support film and television production equity through Manitoba Film and Sound.

      Budget 2000–Manitoba's five-year plan demonstrates we are able to provide services and manage government spending while returning to balance responsibly. We have already made good progress. Manitoba surpassed the target of Budget 2010 and we are ahead of our projections.

      In Budget 2011, the overall expenditure is expected to rise by 2.3 per cent. The projected deficit is $438 million and is .8 per cent of GDP, the third lowest of all provinces in Canada. The share of total revenue spent on debt-serving costs is forecast to be six cents of every dollar of revenue, down from 13 cents in 1999.

      In 2011-12, $438 million will be used for debt‑related payments. Since 1999, specific initiatives have been taken to ensure sound fiscal debt management. These include addressing the unfunded pension liability and funding the employers' share of current service pensions entitlements for the first time since 1961, appropriating money for the amortization of all capital investments, which is used to pay down the cost of much needed assets, paying down general purpose debt, dedicating money from the stabilization fund to pay down the core government deficit arise from the economic downturn.

      Manitoba's economic–Manitoba's economy expanded by 2.5 per cent in 2010, with employment growing at 1.9 per cent compared to Canada's 1.4 per cent increase. Manitoba's economy continues to grow steadily, including a low unemployment rate; a strong labour force; a high retail–a retail sales increase of 5.5 per cent since 2010, the third highest  among provinces; housing starts increase of 41.1 per cent, highest–higher than the national average; the most consistent growth in private capital investment; an increase in total capital investment spending in 2010, ahead of the national average; the second strongest growth in private capital investment amongst the provinces over the five years.

      Since 1999, we have cut taxes to benefit Manitoba families and businesses while maintaining front-line services. Mr. Speaker, for the 12th consecutive year, we will not increase major business or personal tax. Rather, we are reducing them by $65 million this year.

      In fact, income tax reductions will remove 5,600 Manitobans from the tax roll in 2011 and about 22,000 Manitobans by 2014. The basic personal amount, the spouse amount and the eligible dependant amount will be increased by $1,000 over the next four years, including an increase of $250 this year. This is the first full year where small companies will pay no provincial income tax, as we were the first province in Canada to eliminate the small business income tax.

      This, in addition to the elimination of the general corporation capital tax, helps create a healthy business climate and a strong job market. Access to capital remains an ongoing concern for local businesses. To provide support to smaller financial institutes, which are better positioned to best serve local needs, we are introducing a provincial capital tax exemption for small banks.

      Tax credits help Manitoba families save money and make our province more–a more attractive investment option for businesses. The maximum Education Property Tax Credit for seniors will increase to $1,100 over three years. This year, the maximum credit will increase from $800 to $950. We are continuing to provide the Manitoba Fitness Tax Credit for youth up to the age of 24.

      In order to foster enriched extracurricular activities for children, a new tax credit will be introduced and will apply to organized and supervised art and cultural activities taking place in Manitoba and outside the regular school program. Families can earn a credit of up to $54 per child, totalling an additional $3 million a year in income tax savings. When combined, changes to the personal exemption, the property tax credit, and a new credit for children's activities, a family of four will save $212 this year and $374 annually by 2014.

      To promote innovation and entrepreneurship in the non-profit sector, we will be introducing the Neighbourhoods Alive! Tax Credit. This new tax credit will support partnerships between businesses, charitable community-based organizations to create jobs for people facing barriers in employment. We are introducing the Cultural Industries Printing Tax Credit, a 15 per cent income tax credit for Manitoba printers who contract with publishers anywhere in Canada to print books authored by Canadians.

      TD Economics recently reported that Manitoba households are the least vulnerable in the country to negative economic events, such as house price corrections, income disruption and increased interest rates. In fact, they noted that Manitoba is the only jurisdiction in the country where households are less at risk than in 2006.

      Manitoba Hydro rates continue to be the lowest in North America, keeping electrical costs low for Manitoba families and Manitoba businesses. We    continue to support links between the public  sector, the private sector and the non-profit–and not-for-profit organizations and communities themselves to build a stronger province.

      This year our government will spend the equivalent of one point of the provincial sales tax on municipal infrastructure and public transit. This is an investment we believe should grow every year with the success of Manitoba's economy. Therefore, our government will enhance the Building Manitoba Fund by changing the legislation–the legislated annual revenue-sharing formula to the equivalent of one point of provincial sales tax. This will ensure more predictable funding and greater future revenue growth for grants for municipalities. At the same time, we are enhancing accountability and transparency, so Manitobans will know that revenues are being invested in infrastructure across the province.

      The successful Neighbourhoods Alive! program will be expanded into five new communities in Winnipeg. Brandon, the Wheat City of Canada, is Manitoba's second largest city, and we work with the community to build opportunities through projects such as the Strand Theatre. This year we are also   providing funding to support the Brandon Regeneration Strategy, which is developing a long‑term vision for the community's downtown renewal. We are also introducing a new four-year capital infrastructure program for municipality–municipal recreational opportunities, including projects in Brandon.

      To support flood protection efforts, municipalities will no longer have to pay sales tax on flood protection equipment. Mr. Speaker, while some fight against strong minimum wages, Manitoba families can count on us to fight for strong minimum wage. I want this House to know that minimum wage will increase this year.

      We are providing funding for a worker advocate centre in Brandon that will serve rural and northern Manitoba and help workers access service and benefits they need.

      The Manitoba Mineral Exploration Assistance Program provides supports to companies and individuals undertaking mining exploration, and we are investing additional $500,000 this year to support a wide range of research, including search for rare earth elements.

      This year we will provide additional funding to the Métis Economic Development Fund, which will be used to invest in Métis-owned businesses and spur economic development in Métis communities.

      We are focusing on the needs of training–the training of older Manitoba workers, and this year we are–who have suffered because of the downturn in the economy, and this year we are allocating additional funding for training support for unemployed workers between the age of 55 and 60.

      Mr. Speaker, we have had great results in reducing worse place injury. Workers are safer, and time lost to injury rates has been reduced by more than 40 per cent since 2000. This means that more than 10,000 fewer workers sustained workplace injuries that keep them–that actually keep them from going to work–workplace injuries serious enough to lose time to work. We've almost doubled the number of workplace safety and health officers since 1999.

      Newcomers to Manitoba do well, find work and stay in Manitoba to make it their permanent home. Manitoba welcomed a record of 15,805 immigrants between January 2010 and 2011. We will continue to work with the business community and other leaders to push for the removal of the cap on the Provincial Nominee Program to ensure that we get the continued–have the continued recruitment.

      As another step in the development of our innovation settlement strategy, we are implementing a made-in-Manitoba solution for co-ordinating case management for refugees to determine their needs and support them as they begin their new lives here.

      As I draw to a close, Mr. Speaker, I would like to take a moment to recognize a few people in the gallery, and these are the students from Providence College and their instructor who have joined us today. Why do I want to recognize these students? Because these students are the future of our province and these students took the time to come to two budget consultations. I know it must have been intimidating: came to the first meeting to figure out what you were doing; then they came to the second meeting and made a presentation. I would hope that the instructors and students in other parts of the province would look at this and encourage students to take part in this process. So I thank them for taking this opportunity to hear–to have us hear them, and I want to tell them that one of the recommendations that they made has been implemented. I sincerely do encourage people that are here to encourage other people to get involved and help shape the future of Manitoba.

      Manitoba's five-year economic plan continues to bring steady growth and positive results through sound financial management. Our economy is among the strongest in Canada. Our communities are thriving and Manitobans are optimistic about where we're going. Changing direction now would only risk what we have built together. Manitobans have told us what we want and we are listening. They do not want reckless cuts, Mr. Speaker. I can assure you of that. The budget will create exciting opportunities, new jobs and steady growth. And we will lead the way to a better future by investing in families, in education, in innovation, in economic development, in affordability, in clean energy, and in safe communities.

      Mr. Speaker, this budget keeps Manitoba on the right track. This budget keeps us moving forward, and this budget reflects what Manitobans have said they want from their government. Thank you.