

Budget

2019–20

Building on a Strong Foundation

Budget Address



Introduction

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are in Mi'kma'ki, the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq people.

It is a privilege to rise in the House today to deliver this government's 2019–20 budget, our fourth consecutive balanced budget. This position creates a strong foundation upon which to build, to move our province forward, to benefit all Nova Scotians.

Throughout my remarks today you will hear three themes.

1. This budget continues to deliver on our plan to strengthen the financial health of the province, by balancing our budget.
2. A balanced budget allows us to invest in new and existing programs and services for Nova Scotians.
3. A balanced budget creates the right conditions to encourage investments by the private sector and foster strong economic growth.

These are the priorities of our government, and they reflect what we hear from Nova Scotians.

During the pre-budget consultation period, we appreciated that many individuals and organizations responded with their views on the province's finances and their interest in our investments in public services.

One organization we hear from regularly is the Halifax Chamber of Commerce. The chamber has expressed a strong interest in maintaining our fiscal health and in creating an environment conducive to private sector growth including competitive taxation, immigration attraction, and workforce training and diversity.

Today, I would like to acknowledge this input by welcoming Cynthia Dorrington, Chair of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce. A successful business woman in her own right, Cynthia is also the first African Nova Scotian to lead the chamber's board. Welcome Cynthia and thank you for your efforts.

The foundation of any budget is its economic assumptions. A panel of experts, including economists from the major national banks and universities in our province, reviewed our economic assumptions, and they concluded that our assumptions were reasonable. The Auditor General raised no matters of concern with regard to our economic assumptions and revenue estimates. I am confident that our assumptions for this budget are sound.

Our plan projects a positive position of \$33.6 million for this fiscal year and remains balanced throughout the four-year fiscal plan.

When we formed government in 2013, the province was facing a deficit of \$676.9 million. We understand the limitations that deficit budgets and financial burden impose on governments and on future generations. Deficit budgets limit innovation in programs and services and limit investing in infrastructure. Deficit budgets limit our ability to manage the costs of unexpected events such as wildfires, storms, or frost damage to our crops.

Balanced budgets strengthen our reputation and give business the confidence to invest.

For these reasons, we committed to a plan of carefully managing provincial spending.

In September, Nova Scotia received our highest-ever credit rating by Standard and Poor's, putting us among the top four provinces in Canada. They noted that Nova Scotia is expected to fiscally out-perform most Canadian provinces over the next two years.

Moody's, another credit rating agency, affirmed Nova Scotia's Aa2 rating and stable outlook in August, saying: "... the governance and management of the province has demonstrated a higher level of internal control and planning relative to past practices and relative to some Canadian peers."

Our 2019–20 capital plan provides for new investments in healthcare facilities, schools, roads, and other infrastructure.

A key measure of fiscal health is the ratio of net debt to GDP. It reflects the ability of the province to pay its debts. The One Nova Scotia Commission set a goal of 30 per cent net debt to GDP ratio by 2024. We are trending in the right direction and moving toward that goal. We reduced our ratio from 38.2 per cent in March 2014 to 35 per cent last year, and now project it to fall to 33.8 per cent by the end of 2019–20.

Other indicators are contributing to a positive outlook for the province:

- Our population has reached its highest level in the history of the province.
- For the third year in a row, more youth are moving to Nova Scotia than leaving.
- A record number of immigrants have settled in Nova Scotia.
- More international students are choosing to study here and stay here after graduation.
- Exports continue to increase with Nova Scotia seafood reaching an all-time high in 2018, with a value of more than \$2 billion.
- There are now more full-time jobs than at any point in our history.
- Unemployment figures show the lowest annual average since 1976, with the rate for February 2019 measured at 6.4 per cent. That was the eighth consecutive month our unemployment rate has dropped.

This positive outlook builds confidence in our province.

Balanced budgets allow us to invest in new and existing programs and services for Nova Scotians — they give the province capacity to invest in major infrastructure projects. Now, I will demonstrate how.

Improving Access to Healthcare

Nova Scotians expect us to work together to deliver the healthcare they deserve. Our province is changing and so are the healthcare needs of Nova Scotians. Sustainable, effective change takes time — we are striving for continuous improvement.

Creating a more modern, collaborative, and evidence-based future for healthcare means investing in the next generation of healthcare service delivery. It means making investments to improve access to primary healthcare, to improve mental health services and supports, and to reduce wait times for critical services.

The ongoing development of primary healthcare teams continues. The Nova Scotia Health Authority is driving these efforts.

These teams make it easier for Nova Scotians to see a doctor or other primary care clinician when they need to. An additional \$10 million will be invested this year to further develop collaborative teams.

This work is being supported by our investments in training more healthcare providers and in doctor recruitment.

We created a new Nurse Practitioner Education Incentive and are adding 25 more seats at Dalhousie University over two years, which will help ensure we have new and experienced nurse practitioners in our communities.

This year, we will also see the 10 family practice residency seats we announced last year open at Dalhousie University Medical School.

During the past year, our government has worked with Doctors Nova Scotia to develop new incentives for doctors to take on more patients.

In addition to family doctors, our province needs to ensure we train and attract high-demand medical specialists such as anesthesiologists and critical care doctors. Our budget provides \$2.9 million to open 15 new residency spaces for specialty medical positions at Dalhousie University Medical School. This continues to create a greater pool of doctors delivering care to Nova Scotians.

Recruiting internationally trained doctors is another important part of the recruitment strategy. The new physician immigration stream created last year has helped us recruit 25 doctors to date.

The Practice Ready Assessment Program, a new program designed to assess internationally trained doctors, began in February 2019. With the support from the province, the College of Physicians and Surgeons is now screening candidates into the first group.

Since April 2018, 125 new doctors have started working in communities across the province — 57 family doctors and 68 specialists.

Statistics Canada reports that 87 per cent of Nova Scotians are attached to a primary care provider — a family doctor or nurse practitioner — ranking the province 4th highest in the country in patient attachment.

Our sustained recruitment activity is critical as we, like other jurisdictions, continue to face doctors choosing to retire, practice elsewhere, and practice differently.

That is why we are excited about and most appreciative of the communities that are getting involved in recruiting doctors. We know that doctors consider many factors when making a decision about where to practice. They are often choosing a way of life for themselves and their families.

NOW Lunenburg County is one such example. This community organization is working closely with residents, with local doctors, and with local businesses to show potential recruits what kind of lifestyle is possible in that area.

Tina Hennigar, NOW's coordinator said, and I quote: "We strongly believe groups like ours need to be equal partners in the recruiting work. We know our communities, and we know how to connect newcomers in ways that result in successfully landing in a new place."

Our government not only appreciates the efforts of community groups like this, but we are also supporting those efforts with \$200,000 in funding in this budget. We look forward to working with them on how to best allocate this funding.

As orthopedic wait times come down, the quality of life for more Nova Scotians improves. Our commitment to improving access to orthopedic services continues with a \$2.2 million additional investment in this budget.

Over the past three years, we have invested an additional \$39 million, steadily increasing the number of orthopedic surgeries performed in this province. There were 3,933 surgeries in 2017–18.

Not only have these investments helped us hire more surgeons, they also support a central booking process that makes better use of operating rooms across the province and of pre-habilitation services that help patients prepare for a successful surgery.

Having access to mental health services and supports is paramount to many Nova Scotians who have a family member, a friend, a neighbour, or they themselves who may be struggling.

This budget builds on the continued growth in funding for mental health and addictions services over the past number of years. Compared with the \$261 million spent in 2013–14, this budget provides \$295 million, which includes \$11.7 million from the bi-lateral agreement we negotiated with the federal government.

We will support the expansion of the adolescent outreach program, originally called CaperBase, announced in February. Government is investing close to \$1 million each year for 11 new mental health and addictions staff who will support junior high and high school students. This expansion is in line with Dr. Stan Kutcher's report on improving youth mental health.

SchoolsPlus brings mental health and other community support services into our schools in support of young people and their families. The 2019–20 budget invests an additional \$1 million to complete the province-wide expansion of SchoolsPlus.

Government has provided funding to the Association of Atlantic Universities to implement online mental health tools for university and community college students. HealthyMindsNS will continue to give students 24-7 access to online peer support and professional telephone counselling and can help connect students to mental healthcare on campuses.

A legacy of this government is our commitment to taking a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve healthcare infrastructure.

As healthcare needs change, we must adapt to ensure the buildings and services are coordinated and meeting the needs of people today and for the future. Our government is making an historic investment in healthcare infrastructure in Nova Scotia. This year's capital plan includes \$157 million to move forward on two significant projects.

The QEII New Generation project is the largest healthcare project in Nova Scotia's history. From new and renovated operating rooms, to relocated cancer care services, to the construction of a new community outpatient centre, and more, this project will transform how some of the province's most specialized health services are delivered.

This year, the master plan will continue to take shape, preparing for the eventual closure of the aging Centennial and Victoria buildings in Halifax.

We are also excited to embark on the revitalization of healthcare services in Cape Breton Regional Municipality, responding to both the community's changing healthcare needs and the fact that healthcare infrastructure is aging and needs to be replaced.

Dr. Kevin Orrell is the senior medical director for the CBRM Healthcare Redevelopment Project. He says that being part of this project is an opportunity to redesign the health system now and leave a legacy for future generations.

Dr. Orrell, who is here today and joined by the project’s senior director Mark LeCouter, says this about the redevelopment project in his home region:

“The people of Cape Breton will have more consistent healthcare delivery with expanded specialized services, more long-term care beds, and new community health centres that offer the services people need on a daily basis. Newer, more modern facilities will help with recruiting and retaining doctors. Redesigning the health system in this region is long overdue, and the redevelopment project will modernize healthcare delivery now and for the future.”

As the province’s second-largest acute care hospital, a regional referral and emergency trauma centre, and an important teaching hospital, the Cape Breton Regional Hospital will undergo significant redevelopment and expansion. New emergency and critical care departments will be built, as well as a new centre for cancer care that will be more than double the size of the existing centre.

Emergency health services will expand at both the Cape Breton Regional Hospital and the Glace Bay Hospital. They will also perform more surgeries and take more in-patients for the region.

As well, a new community-based paramedic program for the region will see paramedics supporting the timely discharge of patients to reduce unnecessary hospital stays and trips to the emergency department. This is patient-centered care at its best.

New community health centres will be built in North Sydney and New Waterford, replacing aging buildings that can no longer be upgraded to meet the healthcare needs of these communities. These new centres will offer day clinics, blood collection and x-ray services, primary healthcare, and mental health and addictions services.

With an aging population comes a greater demand for home care and long-term care services.

To date, our investments in helping Nova Scotians stay longer in their own homes has grown from \$212 million in 2013 to \$283 million today. We know that is the wish of many, and we continue to assist them in doing that.

Eventually, however, Nova Scotians may need the support provided in a long-term care setting, and we will invest in this area over the coming years.

As part of the CBRM infrastructure project, we will open 120 new long-term care beds, with 60-bed modern facilities in both North Sydney and New Waterford. We also look forward to moving ahead with adding long-term care beds in Mahone Bay and Meteghan, as part of the planned replacement of existing facilities in those communities.

With an investment of \$5 million over 2018–19 and 2019–20, we will begin to implement the findings of the Expert Panel on Long Term Care, released in January. This includes a focus on wound care and service coordination, and on staffing complements.

In 2017, an estimated 2,800 people died of cancer in Nova Scotia, and 6,200 new cases were diagnosed. That is why modernizing and updating cancer care facilities is a key feature in both the QEII and the Cape Breton redevelopment projects.

Our overall investment in health and wellness has steadily grown as we respond to increased needs in the system. This year, the department's budget is \$4.6 billion, an increase of 18.6 per cent, or \$728 million, since 2013.

Investing in Education and Preparing Youth for the Workforce

Our children, of all ages, rely on all of us for their safety and well-being, and to help them prepare for their future. Research shows the significant impact early childhood experiences have.

We are expanding child care services across the province and making it more affordable for parents. The province is investing \$67 million this year, which includes federal funding.

That means more support for hundreds more children in child care settings, and, for the first time, families will be eligible for a subsidy for part-day programs.

In September 2017, government launched the first pre-primary program for four-year-olds. This is a free, play-based program that provides all children an opportunity, regardless of their socio-economic situation. It provides parents with an option, and it has been well received across the province. Currently, more than 3,000 four-year-olds and their families are accessing the program in 185 pre-primary classes.

With an additional \$10.2 million this year, the rollout will continue, and by September 2020, we anticipate that every four-year-old in Nova Scotia will have access to a free, pre-primary, early learning opportunity.

Early childhood educators are at the heart of quality child care. To expand services in both child care centres and in pre-primary classroom settings, we are dependent on a well-trained workforce.

Working together with the Nova Scotia Community College, we have invested \$1.5 million over three years to create 135 new seats and, together with private colleges, will graduate up to 162 early childhood educators this year.

The diversity of our communities will be better reflected in this workforce.

In the spring of 2019, up to 20 Mi'kmaq early childhood educators will be able to participate in a program that incorporates their language and their culture while they work.

We continue to offer bursaries to Nova Scotians from Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, Acadian and Francophone, and immigrant communities who wish to become early childhood educators. Successful applicants can receive up to \$5,500 each year for two years to help cover costs of tuition, fees, and course materials.

We are leading the Nova Scotia public school system through a significant period of reform, with a focus on achievement, inclusion, and skill development to help our students be better prepared for the future.

Fifteen million dollars for inclusive education supports last year has meant more on-the-ground resources working directly with students. This investment funded an additional 191 positions – education assistants, parent navigators, autism and behavioral support specialists, school psychologists, and speech language pathologists.

Inclusive education continues to be a priority for our government. In 2019–20, an additional \$15 million will be available to address and implement more recommendations from the Commission for Inclusive Education.

More resources in our schools make a positive difference for our students. For example, program planning specialists provide additional support for students with complex needs, helping them spend more of their days in the classroom, participating and learning alongside their peers.

Over the past two years, we implemented recommendations from the Council to Improve Classroom Conditions, making class sizes smaller by hiring more teachers. Some of the most valuable contributions have been those of parents who know and understand their children's needs best. These changes will continue to have a positive impact on students going forward.

The province will also invest \$1.4 million to complete the reinstatement of the Reading Recovery program across the province by September 2019.

Since 2013, government has increased the education budget by nearly 30 per cent and added 926 new teaching positions and 381 non-teaching, student support positions. A total of 1,307 new staff are now working directly with our students.

Connecting our youth to the future workforce is a responsibility and a priority for our government.

We are spending \$2 million this year on a new pilot project called the Technology Advantage Program, which brings together elements of high school, college, and the IT sector. The province is partnering with NSCC and IBM to offer a unique career-ready program. Graduates of the program will be ready to qualify for jobs with either IBM or other employers in the technology sector.

As students move from high school to post-secondary education, many will need financial support. Our investments in student assistance are making higher learning more accessible and more affordable for Nova Scotian students.

Our government has created a path to encourage young graduates to pursue their post-secondary education right here in Nova Scotia: increasing the student assistance non-repayable grant, establishing a minimum income level of \$25,000 before graduates have to begin making loan payments, and expanding the loan forgiveness program to support more of our graduates.

Ten universities and a world-class community college with campuses across the province offer quality programs that respond to the needs of industry and lead to long-term, well-paying jobs. This provides graduates with ready access to the training and education needed for a changing world.

The Graduate to Opportunity program has been in place for four years. Since its launch in 2015, the program has funded close to 800 full-time positions with 500 different employers.

This year, we are providing a new funding program for municipalities to create employment in their communities, particularly for youth. With this \$500,000 investment, more Nova Scotians can gain valuable work experience while working on community-focused projects.

Our vision for Nova Scotia includes all of our citizens having the opportunity for success. That means we need to continue to improve diversity in our workplaces.

Employment rates for under-represented groups, including Mi'kmaq and Indigenous Peoples and African Nova Scotians, are well below our provincial average, and this is something we want to help change.

We enhanced the Graduate to Opportunity and Innovate to Opportunity programs with a 10 per cent added incentive to hire individuals from under-represented communities. More than 150 GTO and ITO graduates have been hired with the support of the diversity bonus to date.

This year, the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency will increase its START program grant to employers who hire apprentices from under-represented groups, bringing the total amount available from \$25,000 to \$30,000 over the term of their apprenticeship.

The Connector program is expanding to regions across the province to help more recent graduates and new residents make meaningful connections to employers and find jobs in their fields.

With increased funding over the past two years, government supported over 500 research internships through the Mitacs Accelerate program in areas like ocean technology, ICT (Information and Communications Technology), agri-food, and seafood.

Government is a large employer, and we are taking our own advice. From November 2015 to 2018, the province hired more than 2,300 younger workers and close to half of them were hired into permanent positions.

Last year, we offered work experiences to youth supported by the Department of Community Services. Christal Wicks took part in the Inspiring Success program, working with the Department of Internal Services.

She said, and I quote: “This experience has opened a world of opportunities that did not seem possible before — opportunities that are not only important for my future, but for my children’s future as well. I am proud to be a public servant because I am now able to have a positive impact on the processes that have been put in place to protect and grow our communities.”

I would like to thank Christal for coming to the House today and wish her the best of luck for the future.

Creating the Conditions for Economic Growth

We want a Nova Scotia with more people, more prosperity, and better social well-being. That means making the most of our strengths and creating an environment where local businesses can start and grow.

It starts with having enough well-educated and skilled people to meet the labour demands. Our work with post-secondary institutions and our apprenticeship programs will help meet that need. So too, will our work to attract more skilled immigrants.

We are making historic gains on the immigration front. In 2018, we welcomed 5,970 newcomers to Nova Scotia. These new Canadians are joining communities, starting families, opening businesses, and filling labour gaps. They are staying and building their futures here. In fact, our immigrant retention rate has almost doubled in the last 15 years, and now stands at 71 per cent — the highest in our region.

Province-wide high speed internet is vital for today’s digital world. Yet we know many people around our province lack access to the speeds, reliability, and bandwidth to fully participate.

With its new provincial mandate, Develop Nova Scotia is managing a plan to deliver better access to high speed internet to underserved communities across the province.

This multi-year initiative will draw on the federal government’s investments and other private and public funding sources, including the \$193 million Nova Scotia Internet Funding Trust. Government established the fund last year using one-time revenue earned from offshore projects.

It is one of the largest per capita investments in internet access of any province in Canada. A request for qualifications has just closed and a broader call for bids will follow this spring. Develop Nova Scotia expects to see projects begin in some communities in 2019.

Government is investing in the places where new ideas can flourish and turn into business ventures, like Volta in Halifax, Momentum in Sydney, Mashup Lab in Bridgewater, and Ignite Labs in Yarmouth.

We supported the construction and programming at the Centre for Ocean Ventures and Entrepreneurship, or COVE, in Dartmouth, and are providing ongoing funding for sandboxes, innovation accelerators, startup competitions, and mentoring programs helping young companies get their ideas ready for market.

Government has also worked to increase the venture capital available in the region. Nova Scotia's technology startups have seen an increase in venture capital over the last few years, which includes \$30 million in provincial investment for early stage companies.

Government will continue to build an environment where local, innovation-driven, high-growth businesses can start and grow. This year, we will increase funding for incubators and accelerators by \$500,000, for a total of \$1.5 million.

We continue to see strong relationships forming between government, the private sector, and our universities and community college system. This shows me that we have an all-in approach to capitalizing on our regional strengths and sectors, and that we are using all of our competitive advantages to move forward.

Small and medium-sized companies are connecting with experts and researchers at post-secondary institutions through the Productivity and Innovation Voucher program, delivered by NSBI.

Research Nova Scotia will formally take shape this year and will build on the work of the \$45 million Research Nova Scotia Trust, which to date has funded 53 projects across a range of sectors. Research Nova Scotia will fund research that benefits Nova Scotian citizens — and help our researchers attract more funding and hire more young people.

Nova Scotia Community College plays an important role in unlocking the economic potential in communities throughout Nova Scotia. With 13 campuses, NSCC is modernizing its facilities and delivering training programs that address the workforce needs of businesses in their communities and throughout the province.

Export growth, in new and traditional sectors, is paramount for our ability to grow our economy. We are investing an additional \$850,000 this year to enable NSBI to expand and enhance many of its export development programs in direct support to business.

Government is pursuing trade opportunities that benefit Nova Scotia businesses. We are diversifying our trading partners and continually investing in our relationships in the United States, the Asia-Pacific region, and Europe.

We also believe in private-sector-led growth in our province. The Innovation Equity Corporate Tax Credit will allow companies to make direct equity investments in other small and medium Nova Scotia businesses.

We are also encouraging individual Nova Scotians to invest in Nova Scotia enterprises. A new Innovation Equity Personal Tax Credit was launched in January. The tax credit will incent investments in approved companies of up to \$250,000.

In addition, we are creating another opportunity for investment – the creation of a Venture Capital Tax Credit – which encourages individuals and companies to invest in managed funds that support new and growing businesses.

In line with changes the federal government announced in November, we are providing \$60 million for an accelerated capital cost allowance. This tax benefit will help Nova Scotia businesses, including small businesses across the province, by allowing them to write off their capital investments more quickly.

Nova Scotia remains Canada's seafood export leader with more than \$2 billion in exports. The province's seafood exports have more than doubled since 2012 when they stood at \$922 million.

We will ensure our fisheries sector remains prosperous and sustainable for generations with project funding available from the Atlantic Fisheries Fund. Our provincial investment will total nearly \$38 million over the life of the program.

With Nova Scotia's Seafood Brand program, we will continue to build on our export success by marketing and delivering premium quality seafood products around the world.

We are also making investments to help farmers and producers innovate, grow, and prosper. The Small Farm Acceleration program is an example of how one of our cost-shared programs with the federal government can help the new generation of farmers grow into commercial status. This program is available to all categories of agri-food producers, including grape growers who see the enormous growth potential in our wine industry. From 2010 to 2017, the area of land under cultivation for grapes almost doubled, and the value of our grape output more than tripled.

We are adding \$1.7 million to implement recommendations from Professor Lahey's Forest Practices Review. This will help us shift internal and industry practices toward ecological forestry, including more silviculture on Crown land.

Nova Scotia's mining industry is also important to the province's rural economy. The Mineral Resources Development Fund will reach \$1.5 million this year, following through on a commitment we made in 2017 to help attract investment and move more projects closer to production.

Tourism touches every corner of our province. It creates opportunities for entrepreneurs, creates year-round and seasonal jobs, and contributes to the province's worldwide reputation as a positive place to visit and do business. This year, we will see progress on projects that will revitalize our province's most visited and cherished tourism icons: Peggy's Cove, the Halifax Waterfront, the Cabot Trail, the Bay of Fundy, Annapolis Royal, and the Lunenburg Waterfront.

In the year ahead, we will continue to invest in the creative sector, seeking opportunities to export our cultural products to markets around the world. We will embark on trade missions to explore business and export opportunities for Nova Scotia's talented artists, musicians, writers, and crafts producers. Also this year, with \$1.5 million in funding, the Culture Innovation Fund will support more projects that use creativity and our diverse culture to address complex social issues through art, culture, heritage, and sport.

We are also investing in infrastructure projects that help connect more people and businesses to opportunities. The 100-series highways are the backbone of the provincial road network and economy, playing a key role in business, tourism, and our everyday travel.

Our multi-year plan to twin and upgrade large sections of highways 101, 103, and 104, and to construct a new four-lane Sackville-Bedford-Burnside Connector is well in hand. These projects will improve road safety, create jobs and local economic activity, and make it easier for people and products to move across the province.

Our work to reduce government red tape, modernize services, and improve our regulatory systems for business is unmatched across the country. Government has surpassed its regulatory burden target of \$25 million by more than \$9 million. This means Nova Scotia businesses will save about \$34 million each year.

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business recently gave Nova Scotia an A grade for its red tape reduction work, up from A-minus last year and a D grade in 2015. While we have achieved our target, our focus and work will continue.

Firms across the province are investing in their operations and solidifying their future here in Nova Scotia.

Owners of the Rodd Hotels are investing almost \$7 million to renovate their Colony Harbour Inn and Grand Hotel in Yarmouth, pointing to the ferry service as the reason for that undertaking.

We launched the new Innovation Rebate Program last spring to encourage businesses to invest in their own operations here at home. Many are in rural Nova Scotia, employing hundreds of Nova Scotians.

With the assistance of an innovation rebate:

- A.F. Theriault and Son Ltd. will spend nearly \$6.7 million to upgrade its Digby County operation.
- Michelin is advancing a \$12 million project to expand its Pictou County site.
- The Springhill-based company Surette Battery is investing \$4.8 million in new technology and equipment to increase its productivity.
- Canadian Maritime Engineering Limited is investing \$3.2 million in new infrastructure and equipment at its North Sydney operation.
- John Ross and Sons Ltd. is expanding its Halifax business with \$4.5 million to install a wire and cable recycling plant. This family-based business has facilities in Truro and Goodwood.

With an additional \$5 million this year, the Innovation Rebate Program will double so that it can help even more Nova Scotia businesses.

A recent survey of leading manufacturers in the Annapolis Valley shows strong demand for full-time jobs to support projected growth over the next five years.

This is evidence that the efforts of government and the hard work of Nova Scotians to create the conditions for companies to start, invest, and grow have been effective. Growth in our economy provides government with the means to invest in our people and in our communities.

Supporting Our People and Our Communities

We have an ambitious goal — for Nova Scotia to become an accessible province by 2030. Nova Scotia will become a more equitable and barrier-free province — a province where everyone has equal opportunity to work and succeed, and to contribute to their communities.

Achieving this goal will take hard work and cooperation. Government is committed to doing our part.

We are investing \$1 million again this year in both ACCESS-Ability grant programs for community buildings and for businesses.

Foundation for Learning is a local business in the Colchester East Hants area, providing education programs to children with learning disabilities. Owner Sharon Prest received a grant to support the purchase of tablets for her clinical rooms. With these assistive devices, Sharon and her team were able to access several online teaching sites to help improve learning opportunities for their clients. Sharon is here today and tells us that students are excited to be able to access learning tools online and employees are pleased to be able to track their students' learning.

She said, and I quote: "Being able to bring technology into our clinical sessions with the use of the tablets we received through the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant has opened new doors for our students. There are several online sites that we use on a regular basis, as well as having the students use the tablets as a writing tool."

Government is increasing funding for programs that support adults and children with disabilities by \$14.2 million.

The Disability Support Program provides services to some of the most vulnerable Nova Scotians. This year, an additional \$6.6 million is being invested to reflect the increasing costs of these vital services, and \$5.1 million more for new residential placements for children and youth with disabilities and complex needs.

We will also increase funding for the Flex In-Home Support program by \$2.5 million to support more people with disabilities who live at home. A total budget of \$32.6 million ensures this program grows to meet the specific needs of individuals with disabilities who live at home with their families.

The efforts of Nova Scotians, supported by government, are shaping the blueprint for future poverty-reduction efforts.

Poverty is not only about income. It is a complex social problem that affects individuals and families in many ways. This is why government is working with communities across Nova Scotia to address this problem.

This year, \$5 million of our \$20 million commitment will be available to community organizations to help address poverty-related challenges.

One aspect of this work is the Building Vibrant Communities grant program. This program has funded more than 100 projects at the community level so far.

As an example, one of the recipients of a Building Vibrant Communities grant — Yarmouth's Tri-County Women's Centre — launched a project that allows homeowners in the area to get small repair and maintenance jobs done. Working with the CHOICE Housing Coalition, the women's centre used the grant to partner with a local carpenter and help homeowners cover labour costs.

This is an inspiring example of a community rallying together to identify a real need, and then helping their own. I would like to thank Lisanne Turner, the centre's executive director, who has come from Yarmouth today to join us.

In recent years, several changes have been implemented to allow Nova Scotians with low incomes achieve greater income security. We have:

- increased the allowable asset levels for both single individuals and families
- doubled the Poverty Reduction Credit for individuals and couples without children
- introduced a Personal Items Allowance worth \$101 per month to support people temporarily living in homeless shelters and transition houses, to help buy essential items, including those for personal hygiene
- exempted child maintenance payments from income assistance calculations
- implemented a new and progressive wage exemption to help people receiving income assistance keep more of the money they earn
- worked with the Halifax Regional Municipality to provide free bus passes to residents who receive income assistance, as well as their spouses and dependents

This year, we will build on this work by:

- introducing a Standard Household Rate in January, so that people receiving income assistance will get the maximum amount they are eligible for, as well as a rate increase
- extending the child maintenance exemption to clients of both Housing Nova Scotia and the Disability Support Program, so they no longer have their child maintenance payments calculated as income

We will continue to invest in affordable housing initiatives so more Nova Scotians will be able to find a good home at a price they can afford:

- Another \$3 million will be invested this year as part of a three-year plan to create 1,500 new rent supplements and reduce the public housing waitlist by 30 per cent.
- The Down Payment Assistance pilot program for first-time homebuyers will be established as a permanent initiative. To date, this program has helped with the purchase of about 300 homes.
- We will spend another \$7.2 million more in major repairs to existing public housing buildings to ensure safe and affordable housing will be available now and into the future.
- Four-hundred and sixty-five thousand dollars will help the Cape Breton Community Housing Association manage a new emergency shelter in Sydney.

We know more than 25,000 Nova Scotians earn a minimum wage. On April 1, they will see an increase of 55 cents per hour. They will also see an estimated 55 cent increase in each of the next two years. These increases will help these workers better support their families and give predictability to employers for the next three years.

Another serious issue in our communities is domestic violence. It affects many Nova Scotians and, as evidence shows, women are the primary victims. These threats to women's safety can affect their health, their social well-being, their economic well-being, and that of their children and families.

This past year, we began our work with community organizations and groups to build a provincial plan to break the harmful cycle of domestic violence. The initiative is called Standing Together, and we will invest \$3 million this year to continue this important work.

One project receiving both provincial and federal funding will see Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian organizations developing new supports for victims and their families.

Government stands with Nova Scotians who are committed to helping prevent sexual violence from happening in this province. Our investments to help prevent sexual violence and in support of those who survive will continue.

Government is expanding Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner, or SANE, services to Cumberland and Colchester counties this year. Victims throughout Nova Scotia who need treatment and support will continue to receive immediate medical attention in emergency departments, and all victims and healthcare providers will continue to have 24-7 access to SANE services by phone or in person.

We will also continue to provide Sexual Violence Prevention Innovation Grants that support community groups, including youth and marginalized groups reaching out to their peers to raise awareness and promote a better understanding of consent.

Supporting Survivors of Sexual Violence: A Nova Scotia Resource was created as part of the province's Sexual Violence strategy. It provides free online training and resources for Nova Scotians to learn more about sexual violence and how to support someone who has survived it. New modules are being developed now and will be rolled out this year.

Government will also provide \$470,000 in dedicated funding to support the work of the Provincial Sexual Violence Prevention Committee. This committee is working with universities and NSCC to implement recommendations that will make a positive difference on post-secondary campuses across the province.

Last year, government launched a five-year action plan to get Nova Scotians moving more and sitting less. With \$2.5 million allocated this year, Let's Get Moving Nova Scotia will help create a more active, inclusive, and healthier population across the province.

To conclude, in 2014, the One Nova Scotia report highlighted the province's economic and demographic challenges. It was a call to action to leverage Nova Scotia's assets, opportunities, and human capital to build a much more positive future.

This was a call to leaders in business and labour, to leaders in municipal, provincial, and federal governments, and to leaders in First Nations, post-secondary institutions, the volunteer sector, and our communities.

It was a call to work together with a common plan, and that is what we have done. Government has stood shoulder to shoulder with the private sector and communities, as we move closer to the new Nova Scotia economy envisioned five years ago.

For our part, government has worked to improve our fiscal health and to create the conditions for fostering innovation and economic growth.

Our approach has been working.

Our population is at an all-time high. Our provincial finances are on a stable footing. Our private sector is innovating and exporting. Our people are learning and working.

To return to the themes of this Budget Address, we will continue to improve the fiscal health of the province. We will continue to invest in the programs, services, and infrastructure that Nova Scotians have told us they need and deserve. We will continue to create the conditions that give the private sector confidence in this province, so they are both willing and excited to invest in new and existing businesses.

Together with our partners, government has created and continues to create a strong and proud Nova Scotia.

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