**2024 BUDGET CONTRIBUTION**

**CHESTER COOPER, DPM, MOTIA, EXUMAS AND RAGGED ISLAND MP**

**JUNE 12, 2024**

Madame Speaker,

I rise today on behalf of the beautiful people of the Exumas and Ragged Island to contribute to the 2024/2025 budget.

I give God thanks each day to represent my home having been elected for two consecutive terms. I am exceedingly grateful.

Likewise, I have been elected three times as Deputy Leader of the PLP and I thank the magnificent stalwart councillors, officers and members of the Progressive Liberal Party for allowing me to serve at this level and I promise to continue to serve you will diligence.

I won’t keep you in suspense, Madame Speaker – I fully endorse this budget.

The leader of government business has granted me three hours to speak today, Madame Speaker, I don’t know that I’ll need all that, as I plan to get to the point and tell you how much we’ve accomplished this year and how far we’ll go this next fiscal year.

Plus, as I tried to watch the entirety of Maro City’s victory speech at the FNM convention the other weekend, I was reminded that sometimes less is more.

Nonetheless, I want to congratulate Marco City on his resounding win.

I was most happy that he fought off the forces of Killarney in a most convincing way.

The speech kind of killed the vibe, but I remain happy for him, nonetheless.

He should savor the flavor, as that’s as much winning as his team is likely to be doing in the next few years but let us not forget why we’re here.

This budget displays that we remain unwaveringly focused on our strategy of fiscal management and fostering growth.

And we are growing. Growing our GDP expanding the economy. Growing revenue. Growing investor confidence. Growing jobs with the lowest unemployment in years. And growing tourism numbers with records being set every day, day by day.

I want to send a special thanks to the prime minister for his work as Minister of Finance. This is important work that requires steady hands and a compassionate spirit.

His address was robust, and he spoke for four hours with great substance.

I won’t belabor the details except to say: Revenues are up, GDP is up. Debt to GDP is down and the deficit is down.

While numbers are critically important in the budget, what the budget does is what really matters.

We have been able to get our economic house in better order, jumpstart infrastructure projects through innovative thinking, without increasing the tax burden on the Bahamian people.

We might not hit every target we aim at, but we are advancing this Bahamas every day in ways that truly impact people.

Madame Speaker, I want to report today on my portfolio. What the evidence shows is that The Bahamas is on a trajectory towards another record-breaking year in tourism. Our year-to-date figures for 2024 have surpassed all expectations, building on the momentum of previous years. We are not resting on our laurels. Team Tourism will continue to deploy winning strategies – as we did last year.

Yes, we are leaping-forward in Tourism with Team Tourism, Latia Duncombe, the director general, Valery Alce, our deputy director general, and The Bahamas Tourism Offices manned by qualified Bahamians all around the world.

From January to April 2024, we have seen a significant increase in foreign air and sea arrivals, marking a 12.4 percent rise compared to the same period in the record setting 2023. Simply put, that translates to almost 4 million visitors in 4 months. If this average holds and we hope it does, a million a month will result in a 20 percent increase year over year or 12 million overall arrivals at year-end.

This growth not only highlights our resilience but also underscores the enduring allure of The Bahamas as a premier travel destination.

Each month of 2024 has brought with it a wave of visitors eager to experience the beauty, culture, and hospitality of our islands.

Our diverse islands have each contributed to our stellar performance.

Nassau/Paradise Island remains the most popular destination, welcoming 1,870,438 visitors from January to April 2024, a 13.2 percent increase from the same period last year.

Grand Bahama, Abaco, and Eleuthera have also shown remarkable growth, with increases of 6.8 percent, 3.8 percent, and 2.7 percent respectively.

Grand Bahama and Abaco continue to lead the way in the increase in arrivals by air with 7 percent and 15.5 percent respectively.

The Berry Islands, in particular, have seen an impressive 13.3 percent rise in arrivals.

Cruise tourism continues to play a significant role in our success story.

From January to April 2024, we recorded 3,210,541 cruise arrivals, marking a 14.8 percent increase from 2023.

This surge speaks to the strong partnerships we have forged with major cruise lines and the appeal of our ports of call.

Our stopover visitors have shown a strong preference for extended stays, reflecting their desire to fully immerse themselves in the Bahamian experience.

The average length of stay for stopover visitors in April year-to-date 2024 was 6.6 nights.

Notably, visitors from Africa had the longest stays, averaging 10.6 nights, followed by those from the Caribbean and Europe.

The United States remains our largest market, accounting for 82 percent of our stopover visitors from January to April 2024.

Canada and Europe follow, with 8 percent and 6 percent respectively.

We have also seen a healthy influx of visitors from Latin America and the Caribbean, further diversifying our tourism base.

Our hotels, particularly those in Nassau/Paradise Island, have performed exceptionally well.

Occupancies remain strong, as do revenues.

For instance, the Average Daily Rate in March 2024 reached $592.06, a significant increase from previous years.

This reflects both the high demand for quality accommodations and the premium that visitors are willing to pay for the unparalleled Bahamian experience.

So, let’s put this in a dollars and cents perspective.

We estimate the average spend per cruise passenger is just over $100, while stopover visitors spend around $2,800 each. We’re driving spending, Madam Speaker.

By the way, we are working tremendously hard to grow that cruise spend number by deploying strategies to increase the number of guests disembarking, improving numbers of tours and deploying strategies like the smart city initiative.

This significant expenditure has contributed to an estimated total direct tourist spend in the range of $6 billion, underscoring the critical role tourism plays in our economy.

And we’re growing jobs, madam speaker.

I’ve been hearing this narrative being perpetuated by the opposition about Bahamians not “feeling it”.

In a world where there are “Enemies of Progress” I am comforted to know that the “numbers don’t lie”.

The headcount in our top two hotels has grown from 8,600 in 2021 to 11,700 currently, reflecting a 36 percent increase.

They are real people – and they feeling it, Madame Speaker.

Ask the tens of thousands employed in tourism, the thousands of vendors across the country, hundreds of taxi drivers, hair braiders, jet ski operators, tour operators and tour guides – all across the country.

Ask them if they’re “feeling it.”

Ask the small resort operators all across the Family Islands.

Ask the Bahamas Out Island Promotions Board (BOIPB) as I did and they’re “feeling it”.

Ask the more than 5,000 AirBNB hosts in The Bahamas – they’re feeling it too.

Ask the Bahamians who work at DIR and they will tell you that businesses are recording higher revenues.

Therefore, revenues from business license also increased from $81 million in 2021 to $110 million in 2023 or 35 percent.

This demonstrates real growth in the pockets of businesses.

That’s $110 million along with tens of millions in departure taxes and casino tax increases to build schools, clinics, roads and docks.

That’s money to pay teachers, nurses, policemen, ticket agents and baggage handlers.

All of them are “feeling it”.

And the future of Bahamian tourism appears brighter than ever.

Our strategic initiatives, marketing campaigns, and continuous improvements in infrastructure and services are poised to attract even more visitors.

The figures we see today are not a product of chance but the result of strategic planning, targeted initiatives, and dedicated efforts.

Our tourism strategy has been multifaceted, involving strategic partnerships, enhancing airlift capacities, and executing missions across key cities in the USA and Canada.

We have also worked diligently to present The Bahamas as open for business, eliminating barriers that previously hindered our growth.

Tourism is the life’s blood of our nation’s economy, and our administration fully believes in its capacity to transform lives, empower communities, drive innovation and foster entrepreneurship like never before.

The Tourism Development Corporation (TDC) and the Tourism Development Fund (TDF) are at the forefront of this transformation.

I do believe during his rambling acceptance speech the member for Marco City promised to do away with the Investment Funds legislation in the remote chance that his party wins the next government.

I also recall Marco City previously asking to delay the debate on the TDF to understand it better.

Let me help him understand why his pledge to repeal this legislation is such a poorly thought-out idea and why the Bahamian people should beware those who speak to what they do not understand. The Tourism Development Fund is one of the most transformative initiatives that tourism has ever seen. It comes on the heels of decades of cries about the need to create more linkages and keep more of the money here.

The TDC and TDF are changing the way tourism is developed in this country creating a model where Bahamians own more of the tourism industry just like we said we would do in our BluePrint for Change.

It and the Tourism Development Corporation empower Bahamians, invest in their potential, and provide the financial support needed to turn dreams into reality.

The TDF, funded by a tourism enhancement levy, receives $2 per passenger, and additional funding comes from Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) projects.

For instance, the Royal Caribbean International Beach Club on Paradise Island will contribute 1 percent of its gross revenue to the Tourism Development Fund, ensuring a steady stream of resources to fuel further growth and empowerment.

In opposition, I said we want equity. Equity, I said!

I said Bahamians wanted to participate in the upside.

We promised true empowerment in our Blueprint for Change.

Now that we sit in government, we’re doing it.

What they botched; we fixed.

What they botched, Madam Speaker, we fixed!

If you would recall, the member for Marco City sat meekly in Cabinet when RCI was given a crown lease for 100 years without anything for the Bahamian people.

RCI’s new development will not only be run by Bahamians, will employ Bahamians, have ferry services and food and beverage and entertainment services provided by Bahamians, have equity owned by the government and the Bahamian people, but will see a percentage of revenue – as I said, 1 percent gross - go directly into an Investment Fund **exclusively for Bahamians.**

They are villagers in the night on the other side, Madame Speaker.

Either being taken advantage of by the sophisticated visitor who comes to town or seeking to hide from or set fire to things they cannot comprehend.

As I said, what they botched, we fixed.

Where they see fear and matters too complex to navigate, we resurrect their bad deals and ill-conceived decisions and make them work with sense for The Bahamas.

Where they see doom and gloom we see progress.

We different from them you see.

**Tourism Development Corporation**

I can’t talk enough about the Tourism Development Corporation and the work it is doing. We’re leaping forward with the TDC, thanks for CEO Ian Ferguson and Chairman Rafique Symonette, Deputy Chairman Anthony Bostwick and the TDC team.

A signature project of the TDC is the establishment of incubators.

These incubators will serve as hubs for nurturing entrepreneurial talent and innovation within the tourism sector.

The Minister for GBI jubilantly showed off the new GBI incubator last week. Truly a magnificent modern facility.

We set a very high standard in the pilot and we’re setting a standard in Grand Bahama.

More Bahamians – real people – will own businesses, Madame Speaker.

While I am talking about things the other side does not understand, I would like to address some misconceptions about our financing efforts, particularly the Saudi loans.

On coming to office, we saw opportunity to harness relationships in the Middle East.

I travelled to Qatar and Saudi Arabia at least three times.

We opened new vistas, and those trips were reciprocated many times over.

We expressed the mission of our government to empower Bahamians and received commitment from the Saudis to help.

We negotiated an agreement to borrow $10 million from the Saudi Fund for Development, secured at favorable terms of 2.5 percent over 25 years with a five-year grace period – that means no payment for five years.

This loan facilitates our incubator in Nassau and will also help with the revitalization of Bay Street with $2.3 million, $1.7 million for Grand Bahama Island and $1 million for Exuma.

Each of these projects will start this summer, with further plans for Eleuthera, Andros, and Cat Island to be determined. Each Island will have its own design and theme based on needs.

These funds will support loans and grants for entrepreneurs, fostering new business ventures and job creation across our islands.

I am proud to have helped negotiate those loan terms along with the Ministry of Finance.

In fact, the Saudis have been great friends to us and will help us with our Family Island Airport Renaissance Project as I’ll talk about soon.

The FNM is all about looking for gotcha moments and trying to get likes on social media.

They wrote a whole press release about how the Ministry of Finance was wrong, when it wasn’t, and all they had to do was ask.

They criticize me for seizing an opportunity on behalf of the Bahamian people with the Saudi Fund for Development.

Yes, it’s true that only the Minister of Finance can borrow and it’s true that a resolution of guarantee is required, and this is why we see that resolution in this budget compendium.

We are a government of decency and order.

And by the way, we don’t need to be lectured on good governance by the people who brought us Oban and all the other shenanigans they got us into.

 These are the people who borrowed effectively $10 million from the contractor for Exuma to start the airport knowing full well they had no financing plan.

Doing foolishness, electioneering to try to beat me.

I’ll talk more about that too, Madame Speaker.

But clearly that ill-conceived strategy was dead on arrival.

We are about empowerment for the people, Madame Speaker.

Grants for entrepreneurs in the tourism space are another critical component of our strategy.

We have allocated almost $100,000 for our 50/50 pitch competitions for new entrepreneurs to be awarded this month and grants for startups, in partnership with the Small Business Development Centre (SBDC), the Bahamas Development Bank (BDB), the Venture Fund and BAIC.

It is envisioned that the GBI incubation center will centralize these services with a MOU.

Just like I envisaged more than 10 years ago when I was Chairman of the Chamber – it’s great to see it coming to fruition.

In effect, the Grand Bahama Incubator will be a pilot to consolidate the services to SME’s reducing bureaucracy and shaving expenses and putting more of the money in the hands of the entrepreneurs, as laid out by our Blueprint for Change.

These initiatives support both new and existing entrepreneurs, facilitating their growth and contribution to the tourism industry.

Additionally, we are launching the Home Sweet Home program, leveraging Airbnb and VRBO, to support youth and women and family island entrepreneurs, further diversifying and strengthening our tourism offerings.

I am particularly proud of our efforts in lifeguard training, a critical safety service previously dominated by foreign workers.

On coming to office, I visited a cruise private island and was alarmed by the number of foreign lifeguards on duty , I undertook to change this.

More than 300 Bahamians have been trained in three cohorts, with 153 graduating just this month, including 19 from Eleuthera, 16 of whom have already been hired by Disney. They are “feeling it” too!

This initiative not only provides employment but also enhances the safety and experience of our visitors.

I fully expect that in due course, we will be in a position to advise the Minister of Immigration that work permits for lifeguards are no longer needed.

In this budget, we have reserved commercial watersports exclusively for Bahamians.

This will address many anomalies.

Yes, this same budget they call visionless – we’re dismantling the status quo.

The TDC will support new entrants into this sector, and we will engage with the Port Department and the Ministry of Transport to ensure strict enforcement.

I want to send a stern warning to homeowners who conduct unlicensed boat and car rentals by foreign Airbnb hosts, particularly in Family Islands like Eleuthera and Exuma. We are open for business and open to investors but please do it the right way and participate in sectors that are open.

We increased penalties for these infractions in the last budget period to protect our local businesses and ensure fair competition.

Supporting our creatives is another key focus.

We have worked with investors to curate experiences as we have done with Disney being a prime example of successful collaboration – supporting Bahamian creatives and other entrepreneurs.

Phase two of our "Tourism is Everyone’s Business" campaign will include a song competition for budding artists, with prize money, professional recording opportunities, and a possible ambassador contract for the winner.

Changing the mindset on tourism is critical, and we are doing this through the Junior MOT program, in-school initiatives, and forums in Family Islands and Over the Hill communities.

These initiatives amplify the opportunities of community-based tourism and encourage Bahamian ownership of the industry.

**Downtown**

Madame Speaker, I want to discuss the transformative progress today we have also made in Downtown Nassau.

We are leaping forward in Downtown thanks to the work of Sen. Randy Rolle and the Revitalization Unit.

Our mission is to have our visitors to always have an improved experience when they return with something new to see and do.

 And to make it attractive enough to lure the visitors out of the resorts, out of Nassau Cruise Port and into downtown.

In recent months, we have seen more progress in Downtown Nassau than we have in decades.

The work is far, far from complete, but the work being done is undeniable.

New planters have been installed, and our city now looks and smells better thanks to robust and attentive clean-ups.

We have refurbished the water feature in front of the police station, adding to the charm of our city.

We have refurbished the Queen’s Staircase and we’re working on the water tower.

Additionally, one bus stop shed has been built on Frederick Street, with two more on the way.

Furthermore, empowering a Bahamian entrepreneur, we have introduced valet parking on Bay Street, making it more convenient for shoppers and visitors.

We have significantly increased the number of police officers on Bay Street, with a more than 400 percent increase in personnel.

Today, Bay Street is undoubtedly safer and more secure day and night.

The number of tourism ambassadors downtown has increased, providing visitors with assistance and information at strategic locations.

We have also introduced more frequent garbage collection to maintain cleanliness.

Working with our partners in Environmental Health and Parks and Beaches, we have made significant strides in controlling the rodent population through regular treatments in designated zones.

The Ministry of Works has started addressing flooding concerns on East Bay Street, ensuring that our infrastructure supports the needs of a growing city.

We promised murals to beautify our streets, and they are well on their way, with finalists already chosen.

Sixty new garbage bins will arrive before the end of the summer, further supporting our clean-up efforts.

Nine derelict buildings have been demolished, clearing the way for new developments and green spaces.

We demolished the Anderson house to some criticism about 18 months ago.

Today, we see a beautiful building coming out of the ground.

What a beauty it is to behold – the realization of vision of our work.

We have targeted at least three more buildings for demolition in the short term to create additional green spaces, contributing to a more pleasant and eco-friendly urban environment.

We will expedite projects like Green Spaces and Tin Ferl beginning this summer.

We are closing Market Slope, the street just east of the straw market, and will create 15 new vendor opportunities.

We are revamping infrastructure and creating 10 new vendors on Junkanoo Beach to create a beautiful island vibe.

Only Bahamians need apply for the additional 12 vendor opportunities.

There will be RFP for works on these projects within the next few weeks.

It’s an exciting time on Bay Street, Madam Speaker.

I’m feeling it.

We also plan to introduce an Instagrammable sign downtown to attract traffic to East Bay – as we will do in all of our 16-island destinations.

Our plans include a new incubation center on East Bay Street, more murals, and a formal call for additional restaurants and entertainment venues.

We will work with our creatives to develop a mini art district on one of the side streets where art and poetry and cafes will create new life.

We also aim to bring more musicians to Bay Street.

We launched new technology like our Smart City Pilot and supported StreetSmart242 to use technology for immersive experiences, and to help to get more guests off the ship and increase spending with Bahamian vendors.

Our vision for Downtown Nassau is one of vibrancy, safety, and economic opportunity.

We are dedicated to making Downtown Nassau a must-visit destination in the Caribbean, bridging the iconic resorts of Atlantis and Baha Mar, and showcasing the unique charm of our city.

We are calling on Bahamians to invest in downtown.

The revitalization of Downtown Nassau is a work in progress, but the foundation has been laid, and the future looks bright.

**Innovation in Tourism**

We are leaping forward with Innovation and Technology.

What we know is that embracing technology and innovation is essential for maintaining our competitive edge and enhancing the visitor experience.

In today's digital age, our advertising and marketing strategies have evolved significantly. We are leveraging a variety of platforms to ensure our marketing efforts are effective and far-reaching.

Our campaigns span across traditional TV, both linear and connected, as well as digital giants like Google and Meta.

We are also partnering with leading travel intent platforms such as Expedia, Kayak, Tripadvisor, and Skyscanner to capture potential travelers' attention at every stage of their journey planning.

In our quest to become a leading tech tourism destination, we are focusing on creating a vibrant technology Innovate242 hub in Grand Bahama Island.

This initiative is guided by a phased approach aimed at achieving quick wins to demonstrate progress and build momentum.

A dedicated and experienced project manager will oversee these initiatives to ensure they stay on track.

Our ongoing efforts under the Innovate242 initiative will further position The Bahamas as a hub for technological innovation and entrepreneurship in the Caribbean.

Streamlining the entry process for visitors is a key component of enhancing the tourism experience.

Our new digital immigration card will also be a leap forward.

In line with global trends towards digital payment solutions, we are promoting the adoption of our national digital currency, the Sand Dollar and the use of mobile wallets developed by local financial services providers.

By encouraging the use of cashless payment solutions, we can increase foreign expenditure and benefit local digital payment providers. Our goal is to ensure that small business owners, including straw market vendors and taxi drivers, are well-equipped to accept digital payments.

Our official mobile application on the Google Play store represents a significant milestone in our digital strategy.

This app offers a range of features, including downloadable island guides, shareable postcards, and the ability to request charter flights. A dedicated landing page on Bahamas.com will promote the app, ensuring it reaches a wide audience.

And in our commitment to continuous improvement, we have developed a digital version of the visitor satisfaction survey.

This innovative approach will be rolled out through team members equipped with tablets and QR codes at various ports of entry.

The feedback collected will provide valuable insights into the visitor experience, informing future enhancements.

**Aviation**

We are leaping-forward in Aviation too. Thanks to Dr. Kenneth Romer, our director of aviation, Peter Rutherford and Paul Bevans at the Airport Authority and the entire teams of all of the operating and regulatory agencies.

The aviation sector often goes unsung, but with limited resources The Bahamas has continued to have a reputation for safe air travel.

However, the overall experience and state of infrastructure were simply unacceptable. It’s another area that had not seen significant investment since the PLP restructured LPIA and set it on its current course in 2006.

By the way, we are a victim of our success at LPIA.

We need more investment in infrastructure and expansion at LPIA.

We will be rolling out soon an expansion plan thanks to the diligence of CEO Vernice Walkine, Chairman Gary Sawyer and the NAD team.

Changing the face of the Aviation industry is a herculean task and there are many, many moving parts.

The work continues, but we have made critical achievements.

Over the course of our administration, we assessed the state of all government-owned aviation assets, navigational aids, and equipment, and undertook repairs at selected Family Island airports that are not included in the Family Island Renaissance Program.

A comprehensive policy review was conducted to address land use planning and development around airports, resulting in the compilation of a Safeguarding of Aerodromes Report.

We evaluated the quality of airport services and facilities and continuously monitored passenger satisfaction.

Our success is also attributed to the strong partnerships we have cultivated with aviation stakeholders and international partners.

We signed Memoranda of Understanding with the preclearance with the United States.

We implemented TSA pre-check as the first to do so outside of the USA and we are starting discussions today with hopes of implementing Global Entry.

We’re leaping forward with the significantly expanded airlift to the USA, Canada, and Europe.

**Family Island Renaissance Project**

We are leaping forward with our Family Islands Renaissance Project with a Request for Proposals (RFP) to design, build, finance, operate, and maintain a portfolio of 14 airports across Grand Bahama and our Family Islands.

We completed Ragged Island, Great Harbor Cay and are making significant improvements to Governors Harbor thanks to the Ministry of Works.

One of the highlights of this budget process is the $125 million Saudi Fund for Development loan to accelerate this Airport Renaissance Program.

Once again, the borrowing to be approved by resolution in this budget is for 25 years with a rate of 2.5 percent with no payments required for five years. Simply phenomenal!

We note that these loan terms are also excellent, despite the reticence of Marco City who seems to believe critical infrastructure is built with fairy dust, and not actual money.

The bottom line is despite our better financial position, we are resource challenged and must find creative and diverse ways to fund our infrastructure.

That, or we can sit in here and talk about it while the needs of our people go unmet.

This resolution is a crucial step towards upgrading our airports and enhancing our connectivity.

We are leaping forward Madam speaker, and we will not be distracted by the “Enemies of Progress”.

In fact, Madame Speaker, let me show you, and them what progress looks like.

**In Bimini,** we are making massive progress.

Just over six months ago, we signed a management agreement for the $80 million redevelopment of the airport at South Bimini with Bimini Airport Development Partners.

Already, BAPD has assumed management control of the airport.

A new fire truck has been purchased and is on the way.

Last month we signed a contract for civil works.

Massive airside developments have already been started and the terminal will be unlike anything The Bahamas has ever seen.

Before the end of 2025, there will be a ribbon cutting for the South Bimini Airport, Madame Speaker.

They tried to get that project done, you know.

But like many things, they botched that too.

But what they botch, we fix.

In Grand Bahama, we have started works on the demolition of the Grand Bahama International Airport, and a contract for its design-build has been executed.

We are building two beautiful, elevated terminals in Phase I. This is a design build project and will be expedited.

You know they bought this airport for $1, they told us. The true cost was almost $2 million.

They relieved the sellers of their obligation to repair it after they took the insurance money, much like the Grand Lucayan resort. Yea, they botched that too.

But what they botch. We fix, Madame Speaker.
We have completed the refurbishment of the domestic terminal left as an eyesore by the five Cabinet ministers the FNM had in Grand Bahama.

In Cat Island, we’re building a new terminal at New Bight and expanding the runway. The airside will be mobilized by February of next year and the landslide work has already been mobilized. We anticipate that airport will be fully complete by the third quarter of 2025.

I want to talk for a moment about Exuma, Madame Speaker, in order to demonstrate that what the FNM botches, the PLP fixes.

We assured the Bahamian people of visible transformation in airports over the next two years. Here is how we will accelerate it.

The airports are being standardized in three models: ( Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 layouts, in an effort to increase management and maintenance efficiencies. However,each island is given the opportunity to have a unique facade with stakeholder engagements and make it their very own.

For example, Exuma and North Eleuthera are bothTier 1 Airports, with almost identical floor plans but have a flair of their own to depict the respective island charm.

Madame Speaker, the FNM signed a contract for the construction of a new Exuma International Airport prior to the last general election, then had a groundbreaking and didn’t even bother to invite me. I showed up anyhow.

The only problem is, Madame Speaker, is that there was no financing in place to pay the contractor.

The contractor spent its own money doing work, effectively running up the bill with no mechanism in place to pay it.

So, guess what happens when you don’t pay the contractor, Madame Speaker?
The contractor stops working.

The contractor claimed they were owed almost $14 million.

I want to say that again - $14 million.

We had a study undertaken and entered amicable talks with the contractor to settle.

Despite non-payment issues leading to work stoppages, efforts are now focused on resolving claims and ensuring the resumption of construction this summer.

We not going to disrespect the people of Exuma and use this as an election ploy; coming out of the ground this summer you will see new crash rescue building, new tower and a world class terminal.

Under the adept guidance of MOTIA and with the technical support of Engineering Technical Services since January 2024, significant strides on the landside project have been made.

Additional considerations, including potential cost increases for housing and asphalt, as well as ongoing land acquisition for the Air Traffic Control tower, are being meticulously addressed.

The airside project, awarded for $34.4 million, commenced in January 2023. The scope of work includes comprehensive pavement rehabilitation, new taxiway installation, drainage infrastructure, airside lighting, and electrical installations.

Despite some delays, the project is on track for substantial completion by May 2025.

So, my Exuma, you will have your airport by 2025. I will invite them to the ribbon cutting.

We different from them you see.

On Long Island, the Deadman’s Cay Airport project, with its design substantially complete and Cabinet approval secured, exemplifies our commitment to leveraging public-private partnerships (PPP) for efficient project delivery.

With options to execute a design-build contract, tender documents are expected to be prepared within 6-8 weeks, 6,000 ft runway to encourage regional jet traffic, with a budget of $10 million.

The project aims for completion within 12 months for the terminal and 24 months for the runway.

Every chance I get I tell the people of Long Island that my mother was born and grew up in Deadman’s Cay.

I don’t like how they treated my mother’s hometown, Long Island.

So, what they botched, we will fix.

Long Island, you’ll be getting your airport too.

The Black Point Airport project is another testament to our forward-thinking approach.

Utilizing the Great Harbour Cay template, the design includes a seating capacity for 70-80 passengers, a 6,000-foot runway, and a 6,000 square foot air terminal building, with port of entry and a $7 million price tag, we’re looking at a 12 to 18 months completion.

In September 2021, the design contract for North Eleuthera Airport Landside works was awarded to Alexiou & Associates for $1.6 million.

The design, similar to Exuma Airport with some modifications, includes an expansion of the departures area to accommodate 400 passengers, was approved in April 2024.

The ongoing design of the Air Terminal Building and Crash Fire Rescue facilities highlights our commitment to enhancing passenger experience and safety.

The airside works for $16 million will involve comprehensive pavement rehabilitation, new taxiway installation, and enhanced airside lighting and electrical installations.

The ministry decided in January 2024 to redirect funds to rehabilitate the existing runway.

The design is expected to be finalized by June 2024, with a construction contract signing this year.

You could stop harassing me soon, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

North Eleuthera, your airport will be coming as well.

In Mangrove Cay, we will be building a 3,400 square foot terminal, the bid for which will go out to tender by January of next year and will take 18 months to complete. We are considering this model for Moore’s Island and Mayaguana too.

In Rum Cay, we will be building a terminal similar to Ragged Island fully equipped with solar energy. This will go to tender in 2024 and take 12 months to complete. We apologize to the people of Mayaguana.

Your airport has seen decades of neglect.

What’s there needs to be demolished.

If I could go in the shop and buy a new one off the shelf I would do so.

I assure you though, your MP is working for you, and you will get your new airport too.

The Family Island Airport Renaissance Project is a monumental step forward for The Bahamas.

The new loan from SFD has energized this project and we will work steadfastly to accelerate these projects to advance our nation's aviation infrastructure to serve The Bahamas for generations to come.

**Aviation**

We are leaping forward in aviation negotiating with several Middle Eastern airlines including Emirates, Qatar Airways and Riyadh Airlines to begin direct service to Nassau, leveraging the capacity of LPIA and enhancing our regional multi-destination tourism ambitions.

Overall airlift in 2023 grew by 17 percent over 2022, surpassing 2019 figures by 4 percent.

We increased airline seat capacity by 5 percent annually.

We continue to promote Exuma Airport as a hub for local and international airlines servicing the central and southern Bahamas.

And we facilitated new airlift routes from major cities and Bahamasair signed interline agreements with major international airlines like Virgin Atlantic and Alaska Airlines.

We’re leaping forward with Bahamasair as we have completed the comprehensive assessment by Qatar Airline which is continually committed to providing technical assistance to help with the implementation of the significant findings.

Thanks to Managing Director Tracy Cooper and Chair Tanya Mackey and team at Bahamasair, who do a lot with the little they have.

By the way, when I came to public life I promised the Bahamian people to bring all the strategies that made me successful in business to the benefit of our shareholders – the Bahamian people.

In Bahamasair and NAD we have two loss-making entities each providing ground handling services.

We determined that we would merge this service under NFS creating efficiency and synergy.

We will protect the rights and benefits and tenure of all employees.

We will consult the union.

But we will do ultimately what is in the best interest of the shareholders – that’s all of the Bahamian people.

Our robust strategy for South and Central America includes partnerships with airlines like Copa and Rutaca Airways, opening up great opportunities for multi-destination tourism in the region.

Our achievements in aviation don’t end there.

We assisted in securing The Bahamas as the host for Routes Americas 2025 Aviation Conference in Nassau.

By the way, AfreExim this week with more than 10,000 arrivals is an example of the impact this event will have for hotels, restaurants, tours and the sheer marketing value of thousands of positive endorsements we will receive worldwide.

These partnerships and event plans of Routes 2025 have already significantly raised our profile in the global aviation community, positioning The Bahamas as a leader in aviation innovation and collaboration.

We have concluded the FAA IASA audit, and we are committed to anticipating expediting the Civil Aviation Amendment Act 2024.

These efforts in aviation have significantly enhanced our connectivity, making travel to and from The Bahamas more accessible and efficient.

We have also implemented measures to enhance financial resilience and operational efficiency.

When we are done, we will see an aviation infrastructure throughout this country that will look almost unrecognizable from when we took office.

**SpaceX**

We are leaping-forward into space with an MOU with SpaceX. Subject to final regulatory approval this will open the gateway for Space Tourism and create opportunities for young Bahamians in Space Technology.

One day, I envision that The Bahamas as a small country will boast of having its own space program and Just like we see Aisha Bowe – the granddaughter of Forrester Bowe from Exuma – hopefully we will see even more Bahamian astronauts. In the meantime, this program is good for Space Tourism and will put a decent amount of money in the treasury.

**Investments**

Madame Speaker, We are Leaping Forward in Investments, thanks to Director Phylicia Hanna and the small team at BIA

Foreign Direct Investment is without question the fastest way to grow our economy, and we are doing our part to attract and secure these investments.

Since coming to office, we have approved more than $8.5 billion in new Foreign Direct Investment.

This is a monumental show of confidence in The Bahamas, our economy and our administration.

Our investment strategy has been robust and far-reaching.

In New Providence/Paradise Island alone, we have secured $1.7 billion in new FDI, setting the stage for significant developments that will enhance our capital's infrastructure, boost tourism, and create numerous job opportunities.

Another major touristic investment is expected to be announced soon in New Providence.

These investments are not only a vote of confidence in Nassau's potential but also a critical component of our broader economic plan.

Grand Bahama Island has also seen a substantial influx of investment, with $2 billion approved and with the $30 million for the new Afro-Caribbean marketplace make that $2 billion plus $30 million.

I am excited by the possibility of this project for Tourism, for entrepreneurship and employment of Grand Bahamians and I applaud the Minister for Grand Bahama for her vision.

This injection of capital nurtured and approved by this administration is aimed at revitalizing the island, creating jobs, and fostering economic diversification.

On the Grand Lucayan, I will only repeat what the Prime Minister already said. This project is at a “promising stage”. As I have told you before, I will only say more when I know the money is in the bank.

Exuma, my beautiful home, has attracted $1.5 billion in new FDI.

This significant investment will bolster Exuma's infrastructure, enhance tourism facilities, and support local businesses.

I want to note that not only is there full employment in Exuma, but many positions remain vacant the demand is so great.

Abaco and Eleuthera have each secured $700 million in new FDI.

Cat Island, often referred to as one of our hidden gems, has received $850 million in new FDI.

Cat Island is feeling it too, Madam Speaker.

By the way I apologize to the people of Grand Bahama on behalf of the former FNM administration.

We have been saying they had 5 MPs and Cabinet Ministers with little to show. In addition to show.

It’s actually 5 MPs, 5 Cabinet ministers, 3 Senators, 1 DPM and a GG and 1 Minister for Grand Bahama and they did nothing.

Now East Grand Bahama come here about “where the vision for GBI”? You have no standing to lecture us.

In the words of Tall Pines, you should all hang your heads in shame. Our goal is to ensure that the people of The Bahamas benefit directly from these developments, enjoying improved services and increased economic opportunities. Given all this, we recognize that there is still work to be done to improve the ease of doing business in The Bahamas.

While we have made some modest steps, we are committed to further reforms that will make our business environment more competitive and investor friendly.

To this end, our compliance unit is now up and running, and we are in the process of expanding its capacity.

This unit plays a crucial role in ensuring that investments are compliant with our laws and regulations and that they deliver the promised benefits to our economy, as well as the promised support to the local communities that they are a part of.

By strengthening this unit, we enhance our ability to monitor and support investment projects effectively.

Additionally, we are working closely with the Ministry of Finance and external consultants to review our incentives and concessions regime.

Our goal is to ensure that we remain competitive in the global market, offering attractive terms to investors while safeguarding the interests of the Bahamian people.

This review will help us identify areas for improvement and implement changes that will make The Bahamas an even more appealing destination for investment.

I want to send a strong message to investors everywhere.

When we give concessions we do so to advance economic growth and empowerment for Bahamians.

When we give concessions, when we forego taxes we become partners.

It is our expectation that you live up to your obligations and treat us like the partners that we are.

The model must be a win-win proposition for the Bahamian people.

Finally, Madam Speaker, I call on Bahamians to invest in Tourism.

I remain bullish about Tourism, but I remain concerned that if we are going to continue the growth that we have seen we need more rooms. In fact, we need to double inventory with another 15,000 rooms over the next 10 years to continue to attract high value guests and maintain our position as the undisputed tourism leader in the Caribbean.

**Fly Fishing**

**Speaking of which, we are leaping forward with Sustainable Tourism with a robust agenda.**

A part of that business plan is Fly Fishing, so I want to say a word on this with the leave of the Minister responsible for Marine Resources.

Madame Speaker, Fly Fishing is a $71 billion industry.

And, Madame Speaker, we want our share.

The fly-fishing industry in The Bahamas holds vast potential for economic growth, job creation, and sustainable development.

According to a study conducted by Dr. Tony Feddler in collaboration with the Bonefish & Tarpon Trust, anglers spent an estimated $133 million in The Bahamas in 2018 to guides and lodges alone.

In this budget, provides for numerous concessions to the fly-fishing industry. Whilst more concessions are needed , it’s a step in the right direction to ensure Bahamians have the tools and support needed to succeed.

Recreational fishing contributes over $400 million to our GDP and supports more than 18,000 jobs.

These jobs are critical for our local economy, particularly in the Family Islands where alternative employment opportunities may be limited.

To protect and foster this vital industry, we have implemented robust regulations that must be consistently enforced.

Only Bahamians or Bahamian citizens can obtain flyfishing guide licenses, ensuring that the economic benefits remain within our local communities.

These measures are designed to safeguard our resources and ensure the sustainability of the fly-fishing industry for future generations.

Despite the current success, the fly-fishing industry in The Bahamas remains largely untapped.

Our unique underwater ecosystems, pristine waters, and abundant marine life make The Bahamas a premier destination for fly-fishing enthusiasts worldwide.

Yet, many are unaware of the exceptional experiences we offer.

The Ministry of Tourism is committed to changing this by actively promoting The Bahamas in the USA, Canada, and Europe, as a top fly-fishing destination. We want the world to know that “Fly-fishing is better in the Bahamas”.

Our vision is to create an exciting international annual tournament for MICAL or Andros. Today, I am making a clarion call to all Bahamians interested in the fly-fishing industry to get involved become certified guides and get your piece of the pie.

Whether you are aspiring guides, lodge owners, or entrepreneurs in related sectors, your participation is crucial, and opportunities are abundant.

I want to officially announce that we have retained as a full-time consultant, Mr. Joel Moxey and assigned veteran tourism professional Earnestine Moxyz to develop our Fly-Fishing unit to support the passionate work already going on in this industry.

We have many iconic fly-fishing ambassadors like Prescott Smith & Shawn Leadon in Andros; Garth Thompson, Marvin Bethel & Stevie Ferguson in Exuma; Ezzard Cartwright in Inagua; Sammy Knowles in Long Island, Joe Thomas and Shervin Tate in East Grand Bahama; and Nathaniel Gilbert in Cat Island and many more who I applaud for their leadership in seeing and seizing the opportunities.

By following their model and by working together, we can harness this potential and position The Bahamas as a global leader in fly-fishing tourism.

**Exuma**

Madame Speaker, I want to close by talking about Exuma, my heartstring.

We’re leaping forward in Exuma, thanks to TeamCooper, Heads of Departments and Local Government teams.

Exuma has been a focal point of our development strategy, and we are committed to ensuring its growth and prosperity and I make no apologies for fighting for our people and the people of Ragged Island on a national level.

We have had remarkable developments taking place in Exuma.

Exuma is a jewel in the crown of The Bahamas, and we are dedicated to ensuring that its natural beauty is matched by the quality of its infrastructure and opportunities for its people.

I want my people in Exuma to touch see and feel the developments my representation and this administration has brought about that are transforming Exuma.

Starting with education, the nearly completed Staniel Cay School is 95 percent complete, and we are eagerly awaiting the final connection of power by BPL.

Similarly, the Ragged Island School is nearing completion, ensuring that students have access to a conducive learning environment, and it will function as a hurricane shelter.

Infrastructure improvements are vital for the growth and connectivity of Exuma.

The construction of the Staniel Cay bridge is a significant step forward, enhancing transportation links within the island.

Alongside this, plans for new clinics in Black Point, Staniel Cay, and Farmers Cay are already underway, ensuring that healthcare services are accessible to all residents.

The Black Point Dock and Black Point Airport projects are crucial developments that will improve access and stimulate economic activity..

One of the highlights of our cultural investment for Exuma is the National Sailing Museum, which celebrates our rich maritime heritage.

The museum co-incidentally will feature a photo of the first champion of the Minister’s challenge, inspiring future generations to take pride in our national achievements and heritage.

The contracts for city water from Rolle Town to Little Exuma, Barraterre, and the new water mains in George Town are essential for supporting both residential needs and business operations.

We are proud to have completed 45 miles of new asphalt roads, which are vital for transportation and commerce. We anticipate the completion of this project during 2024.

The opening of the Forbes Hill Cultural Center has been a catalyst for local enterprise, resulting in the establishment of six new businesses.

I am so very proud of this. It’s a model for development and entrepreneurship in these far-flung islands.

This center is a thriving hub for cultural and economic activities, fostering community spirit and economic growth in the settlement where I was born and raised.

Healthcare remains a concern for the people of Exuma.

This must be a priority over the next two years, and I want to thank the Hon. Minister of Health for his commitment to finding a solution for the people of Exuma.

Additionally, the clinic in Ragged Island has been reopened, ensuring that residents have access to essential healthcare services, after suffering at the hands of the former administration.

We have launched crime stoppers in Exuma. Even though we have very little crime, we want to keep it that way.

I want Exuma and Ragged Island to know that I am committed to their well-being and progress.

We are not only enhancing infrastructure and services but also empowering our people, fostering entrepreneurship, and preserving our cultural heritage.

I am immensely proud of what we have achieved together, and I am confident that the future holds even greater promise for Exuma.

Exuma & Ragged Island, I promised you that I would never stop fighting for you.

Our accomplishments are many.

I was delighted to cover them in detail at our recent town meetings.

I invite you to get a copy of my report on my Team Cooper Facebook page.

Madame Speaker, I support this budget wholeheartedly.

I have been observing members of the other side.

Sometimes their antics amuse me, at other times their antics confuse me.

But I know for certain that on our worst day under the PLP, we are getting more accomplished for the Bahamian people than on their best day.

No administration is perfect, as is no human or institution.

But at the core of all we do is the advancement of the Bahamian people.

And we are taking approaches that challenge the status quo to move our Bahamas ahead – not just for PLPs, but for all.

Because at the end of the day, if you say you love The Bahamas, you must strive to make it better, and with the PLP at the helm, it will only continue to get better in The Bahamas.

With the PLP at the helm, we’ll continue to tell the world that it is “Better in The Bahamas”.

I’m feeling it, Madam Speaker.

May God bless Exuma and Ragged Island and may God continue to bless The Commonwealth of The Bahamas.