

BUDGET 2021 SPEECH

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Lekwungen peoples, the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations, upon whose territories we are gathered today.

And I want to give a warm welcome to everyone joining us, both in person and virtually.

This has been a year unlike any other.

Normally, this Chamber would be full of people from communities right across our province.

But today, the empty galleries are a reminder of the unique moment we find ourselves in.

I want to recognize the grief of British Columbians who lost someone this year.

Many people are still feeling the effects of the pandemic—and they will for a long time.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 is still very much with us.

But there are good reasons for hope.

I am honoured to present Budget 2021. It is about building today for a better tomorrow.

This moment calls for action and Budget 2021 delivers for the people of British Columbia.

It responds to the pandemic—and prepares us for future challenges—by investing in health care.

It strengthens the services we all depend on.

And it builds a bridge to recovery and the better days that are ahead.

The pandemic will end. When it does, B.C. will be ready for the opportunities that come with recovery.

And that is a powerful testament to the incredible resilience that people, businesses and communities have shown, and continue to show.

Rising to the Moment

A little over a year ago, our government tabled its last Budget.

Within weeks, our world was turned upside down.

We were under siege by a then-largely unknown opponent: COVID-19.

From day one, our government has had people's backs. That will never change. We will continue to protect people's health and livelihoods until the pandemic has passed.

When COVID-19 hit, British Columbia was in a strong fiscal position. That made it easier to act quickly.

In the early days of the pandemic, we used a broad range of tools to provide sweeping support to help people weather the storm.

It began with B.C.'s COVID-19 Action Plan.

More than 640,000 people received \$1,000 through the BC Emergency Worker Benefit.

Businesses saw their taxes deferred or slashed significantly, with rent relief to follow.

Additional supports kept schools and child care centres operating safely.

A rental supplement helped nearly 88,000 households make ends meet.

Rents are—and will remain—frozen until 2022, offering peace of mind for renters.

Six months later, we launched the next phase of our COVID-19 response plan, StrongerBC.

It redoubled our efforts to fight the pandemic together.

And I am proud to say, Mr. Speaker, that our government is providing more supports per capita for people and businesses than any other province.

And the numbers show that our approach is working.

We have seen month after month of steady job gains, and British Columbia now has the best job recovery rate in Canada.

That does not mean all jobs across all sectors have reappeared, but it is reason for cautious optimism.

Vaccines are another reason for hope. Within a year of B.C.'s first case of COVID-19, we launched the largest immunization program in our province's history.

As more people get vaccinated, we can see the light at the end of the tunnel — but we're not there yet.

This year has had its challenges, from vaccine supply delays to the risk of new variants.

The pandemic demands much from all of us, every single day.

And every single day, British Columbians rise to meet new challenges with resilience.

We are stronger together.

And we recognize that may require making sacrifices in our own lives to put the pandemic behind us.

We have learned that when we are called upon to protect others at risk—we do it.

While we have all experienced some form of loss this year, not everyone has felt the effects of the pandemic equally.

First and foremost, to those who lost a loved one to COVID-19, we offer our condolences—may your loved ones be for a blessing.

These are difficult days for many.

I think of people who have been targeted by a troubling rise in racist attacks.

I think of opportunities lost, especially for young people whose plans to attend university or start a new job were disrupted.

I think of people, predominantly women, who stepped up to provide care for their children and aging parents. Even when, too often, this meant stepping back from their careers.

I think of the hospitality and tourism workers who, in many cases, saw their jobs disappear overnight.

Or business owners who faced the agonizing prospect of scaling back or shutting down operations to help keep customers and staff safe.

And yet these struggles have given rise to stories of resilience.

Even in those early and uncertain days, frontline workers continued to do their jobs, delivering necessary goods and services.

I think of Sarah, a nurse in Surrey, who is taking the place of family by the bedside of critically ill patients.

Or Dr. Ahmad and his team on Vancouver Island who watched the crisis escalating around the world, and worked overtime to prepare for its arrival here.

I also think of Cheri, a HandyDART driver in Kamloops, who serves as friend, counsellor, and listener for many of her passengers—especially these days.

Or Angie, an early childhood educator in Kitimaat Village, who led the opening of a new child care centre in her community and showed great leadership during the pandemic.

And I think of Sydney-Anne in Invermere, who worked hard to keep the shelves stocked at the grocery store she owns and manages.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to recognize the many businesses that pivoted, sometimes overnight, retooling to save lives and jobs in the fight against COVID-19.

For Karrie, a restaurant owner in Victoria, it was amazing to see the local industry come together and share information on everything from ordering plexiglass barriers to navigating support programs.

In my community of Coquitlam, Novo Textiles went from producing dog beds to becoming the first made-in-Canada manufacturer of N95 masks.

And, of course, there were countless others who checked in on neighbours, delivered supplies or put their hands together to keep the 7 p.m. cheer alive.

It's thanks to the people of our province that we have come this far.

Our recovery won't happen overnight. But by choosing to invest in people and building the collective resilience of our province, we will keep moving forward together.

Building Today for a Better Tomorrow

Budget 2021 protects people's health and livelihoods today, while building a bridge to economic recovery and better days ahead.

It starts with a strong foundation. The same principles that led our response to COVID-19 will guide our recovery.

First, that healthy people, healthy communities, and a strong economy are one and the same.

Second, that B.C.'s recovery must include everyone.

And third, it's more important than ever before to maintain the services people count on.

A Healthy and Safe Province

As the last year has reminded us, there is nothing more important than the health of our loved ones.

As my grandfather, my Zaida, was fond of telling people, "If you don't have your health you don't have anything." And while he certainly wasn't speaking about a global pandemic, it does hold true.

The pandemic threatens not only our health—it has completely disrupted economies around the world, including our own.

Our recovery depends on keeping people healthy and safe.

Budget 2021 delivers \$4 billion over the next three years to help keep people safe from COVID-19 today, while strengthening our health and mental health care system for tomorrow.

This includes \$900 million to support testing, contact tracing, personal protective equipment and the largest vaccine rollout in B.C.'s history.

Our focus is two-fold. First, to reinforce B.C.'s health-care system, both against the pandemic and to meet the needs of the future.

Second, to make real, significant, and continued progress toward the mental health system that British Columbians deserve.

For many B.C. seniors, staying safe meant saying goodbye to visits with family members, hugs from grandchildren, or just a trip to the post office or grocery store.

And it has been an incredibly difficult and lonely year for so many parents and grandparents.

Budget 2021 continues to protect seniors by expanding home health monitoring systems and adding more care aides to assist with daily living at home.

Additionally, the Health Career Access Program will help build up a compassionate and qualified workforce in the seniors care sector.

Launched last fall, the program will recruit, train and employ up to 3,000 people who lost their jobs in some of the hardest hit sectors.

And while COVID-19 is top of mind, it is not the only demand on our health-care system.

Budget 2021 helps to address systemic racism in health care and make sure that Indigenous peoples have access to culturally appropriate care.

Our plan also continues to tackle surgery backlogs made worse by the pandemic.

And it helps to deliver the diagnostic services people need, more quickly.

We're also bringing health care closer to home with more urgent and primary care centres.

I'm proud to say that new hospitals are on the way for communities across B.C. And that, Mr. Speaker, includes Surrey's new hospital and cancer centre.

It hasn't only been our physical health that has suffered over the last year. The pandemic has taken a significant toll on the mental well-being of British Columbians.

And it's not the only health emergency facing our province.

We recently marked a sombre five years since B.C.'s overdose emergency was declared.

I want to recognize the thousands of people we have lost to a poisoned drug supply—the parents and siblings, children and colleagues, friends and neighbours whose lives were cut short. May their memories be for a blessing.

We are taking action to help end the tragedy playing out in communities around British Columbia.

Our plan meets the unprecedented need with a historic response.

Budget 2021 delivers \$500 million over three years—the largest investment in mental health and addictions services in our province's history.

We are investing in our youth, so that small problems don't grow larger, with more mental health supports in schools and by continuing to expand Foundry Centres, doubling the number by 2024.

We are also quadrupling the number of integrated child and youth support teams to provide community-based mental health and substance use services.

Through Budget 2021, we are accelerating and expanding programs put in place to respond to the overdose crisis.

Our plan delivers a wide spectrum of substance-use treatment and recovery services, including more funding for addictions treatment.

Many of the emergency measures brought in during the pandemic to help keep people alive are now permanent.

We are also adding new treatment and recovery beds throughout the province to support people on the path to healing and wellness.

Supports for People, Businesses and Communities

Mr. Speaker, our vision for B.C.'s recovery includes everyone. Budget 2021 enhances care for vulnerable people in our communities.

Being able to stay home and stay safe is not an option for those sleeping rough on our streets, moving between shelters, or camping in parks.

Budget 2021 provides places to stay for people without homes and an opportunity to connect with support services. At the same time, we continue to invest in new permanent housing for those who need it.

The pandemic has been hardest on those who were already struggling to make ends meet.

Budget 2021 delivers the largest-ever permanent increase to income assistance and disability assistance rates.

In total, Mr. Speaker, this represents a 53% increase to income assistance rates since 2017.

And—for the first time since it started in 1987—we are increasing the Senior's Supplement.

Soon, 80,000 low-income seniors will have a little extra money to pay their bills each month.

Budget 2021 continues our work over the last four years to make life more affordable.

Millions of families have received the B.C. Recovery Benefit—up to \$500 for individuals and up to \$1,000 for families.

I heard from people who put the money toward healthier groceries for the month. Others used it for long overdue vehicle repairs.

And now, Mr. Speaker, Budget 2021 adds another way for families to save money, while contributing to a cleaner future.

Starting in the fall, those aged 12 and under will be able to ride transit—for free.

This will bring the next generation of transit users onboard, with the potential to save families hundreds of dollars every year.

To be exact, Mr. Speaker, it's up to \$672 per year, per child, for families in Metro Vancouver compared to a monthly TransLink pass.

And for families that depend on BC Transit, it's up to \$400 per year.

Our plan also lays the foundation for the new Surrey-Langley Skytrain all the way to Langley and a toll-free crossing to replace the George Massey Tunnel.

For too many families, finding an affordable home remains a stretch, even with a steady, well-paying job.

And for businesses, affordable housing is key to attracting and retaining workers.

The HousingHub, within BC Housing, brings government, non-profits, communities and private-sector partners to the table with the shared goal of getting more homes built.

Budget 2021 provides up to \$2 billion in financing to further support and accelerate these partnerships.

This additional lending power will help build approximately 9,000 new homes for middle-income British Columbians.

And that is on top of the 26,000 already underway or complete through our \$7-billion Homes for BC plan—the largest housing investment in B.C.'s history.

Mr. Speaker, we are also building the social infrastructure that families need to navigate the pandemic and come out the other side stronger.

Last March and April saw schools and some child care centres temporarily close their doors. Consequently, women's participation in the workforce plummeted.

It's a stark reminder that when it comes to building a strong recovery, child care is non-negotiable. And that investments in child care are investments in a strong economy.

A universal child care system is on the way for British Columbia. Today, we take another step forward with Budget 2021.

Mr. Speaker, we are more than doubling the number of \$10-a-day spaces across our province.

This adds to the thousands of parents who are already saving up to \$1,600 a month per child through our Childcare BC plan.

I want to take a moment to recognize B.C.'s early childhood educators. This year you went above and beyond to keep child care centres open and children safe.

Not only do you support B.C. kids, you are the workforce behind the workforce.

We are proud to recognize your role and return the support.

For B.C.'s early childhood educators, Budget 2021 doubles the current wage enhancement to \$4 per hour.

Work is also underway to strengthen the early learning continuum by bringing child care into the Ministry of Education.

We are making record investments in B.C. schools to give kids the best possible learning experience.

Budget 2021 strengthens our K-12 system to enhance mental health supports, create more child care spaces on school grounds, and develop an anti-racism framework.

This is part of our work to respond to a deeply disturbing rise in hatred and racism since the pandemic began. We are also expanding B.C.'s anti-racism network, developing our province's first anti-racism law, and working with communities on race-based data collection.

Budget 2021 also invests \$3.5 billion to replace, renovate or expand schools right across the province.

Close to 27,000 new school seats have been delivered or are underway, from planning through to construction.

From Kamloops to Quesnel, Haida Gwaii to Fernie, and Ucluelet to Surrey—we're working hard to make sure that every child in B.C. gets the start they deserve.

Mr. Speaker, there's no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown us all more than a few curveballs.

I want to recognize the many B.C. businesses that have adapted safely under difficult circumstances.

In the early days of the pandemic, there was uncertainty about how its effects would be felt in different sectors and regions of our province.

Now, even as we see signs of recovery, there are still businesses that need help.

We are responding, Mr. Speaker, with more than \$800 million in ongoing supports for businesses through this year's budget.

Earlier this month, we launched relief grants for the thousands of restaurants, bars, gyms and other local businesses that were most affected by necessary public health restrictions to battle a spring wave of the pandemic.

We've also made other changes to keep the hospitality industry afloat, including making wholesale pricing on liquor permanent.

Through it all, our commitment to support businesses is unwavering. And our work to try to ensure every business gets through this pandemic is ongoing.

Budget 2021 continues to advance measures laid out in our StrongerBC plan, with more targeted tools to ensure a sustainable, innovative and inclusive recovery.

This includes funding for the extended small and medium-sized business grant program, along with tax rebates for businesses that increased wages or hired more people in the last few months of 2020.

And B.C. businesses are on track to receive half-a-billion dollars in PST rebates for the purchase of new machinery and equipment.

We also expanded the successful Launch Online program to help over 5,000 businesses access the digital marketplace.

With most of our world moving online this year, high-speed internet has been vital for reaching local, regional, and global markets.

Since July 2017, we have launched high-speed internet projects in more than 500 communities.

Our StrongerBC plan included record investments in connectivity infrastructure for rural and Indigenous communities.

And now, Mr. Speaker, for the first time, Budget 2021 provides stable base funding that will continue to improve connectivity across the province.

Expanding access to the digital economy will set up more people, communities and local businesses to succeed in a post-pandemic economy.

And we know that with recovery comes new opportunities.

Budget 2021 capitalizes on this by delivering \$500 million to support the launch of InBC, a new strategic investment fund.

This fund will help promising companies scale up, anchor talent, and keep jobs and investment at home in British Columbia.

It will also deliver economic, environmental and social returns.

Mr. Speaker, while we invest in the jobs of the future, we must also keep investing in the sectors that have been key to our success all along.

Our tourism industry is world renowned, but right now the people who have worked so hard to put B.C. on the map are hurting.

Budget 2021 upgrades local infrastructure that tourism communities need today, like rail trails, rest stops and airports.

It also reserves \$100 million to support tourism recovery, including support for the anchor attractions that bring in visitors and create jobs.

When it's safe to open our doors again, B.C. will be ready to welcome the world back.

Strong Recovery

Budget 2021 keeps communities strong as we fight COVID-19, while preparing our province for recovery.

We are making record investments to build the hospitals and schools, transit and roads that our growing province needs.

What does this mean for British Columbians?

It means 15 new and upgraded hospitals, from Terrace to Dawson Creek.

23 new urgent and primary care centres that are currently open, with more on the way.

146 new, expanded, or renovated schools are underway.

Thousands of new student housing beds in Kelowna, Salmon Arm, Burnaby, Victoria, Prince George, Cranbrook and more.

New state-of-the-art post-secondary facilities, like BCIT's health science building and a National Centre for Indigenous Law at UVic.

And we are moving forward on major transportation projects, like the Broadway Subway in Vancouver and the Quartz Creek Bridge replacement.

Today, Mr. Speaker, we are expanding our investment.

In this year's plan, our infrastructure commitment is \$3.5 billion higher than in Budget 2020.

Mr. Speaker, this is the strongest investment in B.C.'s history.

Our plan creates more than 85,000 jobs over the next three years.

Our plan builds schools, hospitals and health-care centres to bring services for people closer to home.

And, by investing in communities across the province, our plan makes sure that everyone—no matter where they live—feels the benefits.

When we talk about recovery, we are talking about much more than dollars spent and GDP boosted.

We are talking about real and meaningful ways to make life better for people now.

Already thousands of people have benefited from skills training programs launched in the fall.

For example, a new project with the First Nations Technology Council will connect Indigenous participants with a career in tech.

And through in-class and online training, the College of the Rockies is helping people find work as early childhood educators.

Budget 2021 builds on the work underway by equipping more people with the skills needed to find a good job today.

We know that British Columbians are ready to roll up their sleeves and be part of our province's recovery.

I think of the thousands of hospitality and tourism workers who are supporting the vaccine rollout.

Team B.C. needs all hands on deck.

And Budget 2021 delivers with targeted opportunities for people to retrain and retool their skills.

Thirty new micro-credential courses will help thousands of people quickly shift direction and land jobs in high-demand fields, like construction, technology, healthcare, child care and more.

We also know that the pandemic derailed many young people's plans to attend post-secondary school or training, or to find a summer job.

Not only are these major life milestones, this disruption could have long-term consequences for employment down the road.

We owe it to young people to re-create some of the opportunities they lost.

Our StrongerBC Future Leaders program delivers almost \$45 million to help create and expand employment opportunities for youth.

More than 5,000 young people will land jobs, internships and co-ops.

These skills will last a lifetime, helping young British Columbians move up and move on from the pandemic.

From looking after B.C.'s awe-inspiring coastline, parks and trails to launching a career in tech.

And in partnership with post-secondary institutions, another 3,000 students will benefit from new work integrated learning placements.

Mr. Speaker, our commitment to reconciliation guides our work as a government every single day.

From investing in language revitalization with Indigenous peoples, to the historic commitment to share as much as \$3 billion with First Nations over 25 years.

Reconciliation is an active and ongoing process and, Mr. Speaker, it will form the foundation of an equitable and inclusive recovery.

Through our recovery plan and Budget 2021, we are working side-by-side with Indigenous communities and organizations to expand skills training programs.

Thousands of Indigenous people will be able to get back into the workforce faster and contribute to recovery efforts across the province.

We are also adding 400 more culturally based child care spaces through the Aboriginal Head Start Program.

These no-fee spaces are run by Indigenous communities, for Indigenous children to help give kids the best possible start.

Meaningful reconciliation means following through on our commitments.

Budget 2021 provides dependable funding to support First Nations' engagement, stewardship, negotiations and economic development.

It also adds new resources to support the implementation of reconciliation agreements and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.

COVID-19 may be the greatest challenge of our generation, but our action on climate change will shape the world for generations to come.

Our CleanBC plan will help us reach a more sustainable economic future on the other side of the pandemic.

It is North America's most progressive plan to reduce carbon pollution, while creating good new jobs.

Mr. Speaker, Budget 2021 brings the total for CleanBC to nearly \$2.2 billion over five years.

This year's budget expands clean transportation, builds more energy-efficient buildings, and works with industries to reduce their carbon footprint.

And, Mr. Speaker, Budget 2021 will keep us at the cutting edge with a new Centre for Innovation and Clean Energy.

We all have a role to play in achieving a greener future.

Budget 2021 makes it easier for people to choose cleaner transportation options while saving money.

As of tomorrow, Mr. Speaker, new purchasers of e-bikes will no longer pay PST.

That means \$7 million in savings per year for British Columbians.

Electric vehicles are also selling in record numbers here in B.C.

As of last count, there were more than 54,000 electric vehicles on our roads—the highest rate of sales in North America.

We are building on the momentum by helping more people go electric, expanding the charging network, and electrifying more school buses and ferries.

We are also continuing to support other emerging opportunities, like mass timber technology.

Mass timber is good for forestry communities—because it adds value to timber rather than relying on volume alone.

It is good for the environment—because it is sourced from sustainably-managed forests that have a lower carbon footprint.

In short, it is good for British Columbia.

Forests are the lungs of our province, capturing and storing carbon—we can't take them for granted.

Thousands of tree planters set out last year—despite the pandemic—to replant forests, including those affected by wildfires and pine beetle.

The result was an astonishing 300 million seedlings planted, with another 300 million planned for this year.

Our province has great natural wealth, and that goes far beyond our forests.

As we tackle climate change and invest in our clean tech future, we know that our mining sector will play an important role.

It provides the metals and minerals that will be used—here and around the world—to create green technologies, from electric vehicles to wind turbines.

Our province's natural beauty is also a great source of wealth, one that we have all come to rely on as we turn to the great outdoors to recharge in a COVID-safe way.

Budget 2021 enhances people's access to nature by expanding and improving campgrounds and trails.

And starting next year, Mr. Speaker, we will be adding up to 100 new campsites throughout the province—every single year.

Our plan views B.C.'s recovery as an opportunity to accelerate environmental protection and sustainability.

The successes we are seeing through CleanBC show how protecting our environment is good for people and the economy.

This is true today—as we continue our fight against COVID-19—and it will be true once we put the virus behind us.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker, we have all been through a great deal.

I'm sure every single one of us can point to a moment in the last year when our world was turned upside down.

Whether it was the closures of schools, offices, or the international borders. Or with the introduction of new ideas, like social distancing and safe bubbles.

For me, it was a familiar feeling, because I experienced a moment like this when my world changed after a sudden cancer diagnosis years ago.

I felt overwhelmed by the uncertainty ahead—a feeling we all understand far too well after this last year.

A turning point came when I realized that my family and I were not in our fight alone.

This realization came about thanks to an unexpected hero: my neighbour from across the street.

After a difficult day, she arrived on my doorstep to check on me, and she brought with her a home-made tiramisu.

It was a small gesture of support. But it meant the world to me—I knew it meant that she had my back.

And I knew that my family could depend on our community to lift us up when we needed them.

I want every British Columbian to feel that same way.

To know that we have their backs—no matter what.

We are there for them.

There are challenges ahead, but I am confident that by drawing on our shared resilience we will get through these challenges together.

Time and time again, British Columbians have proven that we care for one another.

We care for our communities.

And we care for the province that we call home.

The pandemic will end. But our work to build a better future will not.

To all those listening, B.C is coming back—stronger than ever.

Budget 2021 gives us the tools we need to build a bridge to the better days ahead, and I look forward to crossing it together.