

BUDGET 2023 SPEECH

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

Today, I am honoured to present Budget 2023.

A budget that builds today for a stronger tomorrow.

That eases the pressures we feel in our daily lives.

And that reflects the priorities of British Columbians.

This year's budget will improve health care, build more homes, help with rising costs and make our communities safer.

Budget 2023 will continue our work to build a stronger, cleaner economy for everyone – right across our province.

Mr. Speaker, these uncertain times require careful, thoughtful action.

Action that addresses the uncertainty ahead, while moving us forward on long-standing priorities.

Like reconciliation, climate change and tackling global inflation.

Action is what British Columbians want from their government.

And it's what Budget 2023 delivers.

With real results focused on the priorities of British Columbians.

Uncertain times

Because while B.C. is a great place to live, many people are facing real challenges.

Global inflation is raising the cost of just about everything. It's getting harder to afford groceries, find essential medication for your kids, or fill jobs.

By the end of the month, many families are wondering if they'll ever get ahead.

Then there's the added pressure of economists predicting a global economic slowdown.

We can't control global forces.

But we can make choices that will help British Columbians weather the storm and come out stronger.

Going it alone doesn't work

Some believe we should respond to uncertainty by pulling back. By making cuts that reduce services. Or by making people pay out of pocket for tolls and private health care.

That's not what British Columbians want. And that's not our government's approach.

Instead of making cuts to education and expecting teachers to fill the gaps, we are making record investments in B.C.'s elementary schools and high schools. This year is no exception.

Instead of privatizing health care, we are strengthening public health care.

Instead of leaving parents to shoulder the cost of child care, we are saving them hundreds of dollars or more every single month. All the while, we are opening new spaces across the province.

Because we know that supporting British Columbians will build a stronger province for us all.

We can see that in the results to date.

Over three-quarters of last year's job growth in B.C. was driven by women's employment.

This is a reflection of our government's work on child care.

It's clear that we can't afford to go back to short-sighted thinking.

The kind of thinking that cuts services today, while leaving the actual costs for tomorrow.

It didn't work before, and it certainly won't work now.

When times are tough, that's exactly when you need someone in your corner.

Defending you from global uncertainty and building a stronger province for everyone.

That's why our government will always be there for British Columbians.

And it's why we're putting this year's new investments and multi-billion-dollar surplus to work for people.

To deliver another round of the BC Affordability Credit and help more people make ends meet.

To protect people from evictions and rent hikes, while preserving rental buildings.

And to support growing cities and towns right across the province with a total of \$1 billion in grants.

To improve local roads and water facilities and build more community centres, trails and arenas.

Because as someone who is proud to call rural B.C. home, I know it's not just our large cities facing big changes.

That's why these grants are going to all 188 of B.C.'s municipalities and regional districts.

This is part of our ongoing work to support rural communities.

Especially those that rely on B.C.'s forest industry and have been hit hard by the effects of the pine beetle and wildfires.

Because we are at our strongest when everyone – rural and urban – shares in the benefits of a strong economy.

Investing now to build a stronger tomorrow

In an uncertain world, you can be certain that our government has your back.

Budget 2023 responds to the priorities of British Columbians.

We know you want health care you can count on.

You want more affordable homes built faster.

You want help with everyday costs and an economy that is clean and strong.

And you want a safer and healthier community.

This budget delivers for you.

Today, we are taking another step forward toward a brighter future for all.

Strong public health care

Mr. Speaker, people want to know that strong health care will be there, when they need it.

At the same time, coming out of the pandemic, health-care workers have never been under greater stress.

These challenges are not unique to B.C.

That's why our government and other provinces across the country have been working with Ottawa to help us deliver better care for people.

There is more work to do. The federal proposal we received earlier this month provides stable funding for the next generation.

Stability is good, but the status quo is not good enough.

That's why we're not waiting.

Our government is taking action now to deliver better health care for more people.

This year's budget builds on the work we've done with an additional \$6.4 billion to strengthen and improve health care over the next three years.

We're continuing to manage COVID-19 and flu levels by supporting the ongoing public health response.

And as our population increases and ages, we're adding \$2.6 billion over the plan to meet the growing demand for health services, including cancer care.

Cancer has touched the lives of almost everyone in B.C.

Its impact – on patients, families, and our struggling health-care system – is one of the greatest challenges we face.

A few days ago, we shared new steps to deliver cancer care that people can count on, for themselves and their loved ones.

As part of our fight against cancer, this year's budget commits \$270 million over the next three years.

We're focused on improving access to screening, early detection, diagnosis and treatment.

Because Mr. Speaker, nobody should be stuck waiting for a test result or urgently needed treatment.

We're also increasing compensation for the doctors providing this lifesaving care.

It's part of our work to recruit and retain more oncologists in British Columbia.

We know our health-care system is only as strong as the people who keep it running.

This year's budget delivers a new deal for family doctors and supports B.C.'s health-care workforce.

Nearly \$1 billion for our health workforce strategy will recruit, train and retain workers.

We're also adding 1,700 health care staff and training 3,000 more graduates.

New bursaries and grants will make it more affordable than ever to start a career in health care.

At the same time, we're adding new resources to get more internationally trained doctors, nurses and health-care staff working and off the sidelines.

Strengthening mental-health and addictions care

Mr. Speaker, people understand that mental-health is health.

That's why our government made the largest investment in mental-health and addictions services in B.C.'s history.

It's why we are opening more urgent and primary care centres around the province – which is how most people first access the mental-health care they need.

And it's why we are building complex-care housing for people living with addictions, severe mental-health issues or brain injury.

This year's budget will get hundreds more units built and enhance health-care supports at existing buildings.

Our goal is to stop the cycle of evictions, shelters, emergency rooms and jails for those struggling with mental-health and addictions.

Because we won't stop working until all British Columbians get the help they need, when they need it.

Budget delivers more than \$1 billion in new funding over three years to support services and capital projects for mental-health, addictions and treatment services.

Our focus will be on expanding supports across the spectrum of care for people struggling with addiction.

We'll do this by expanding the number of treatment and recovery beds.

By creating new recovery communities to support those who have gone through treatment.

And by delivering wraparound services for youth and more Indigenous treatment centres.

This will all feed into our work to develop and implement a new model of seamless care.

One that supports people through their entire recovery journey – from detox to treatment to aftercare.

We'll begin with new investments in Road to Recovery in partnership with Providence Health and Vancouver Coastal Health.

Our goal will be to expand the initiative to other regions.

People may have heard of the Red Fish Healing Centre in Coquitlam, on the site of the old Riverview Hospital. It's a first-of-its-kind facility in North America.

At Red Fish, complex mental illness and addictions are treated simultaneously.

With this year's budget, we will expand the Red Fish model of care across the province with regional facilities, so more people have access to these services closer to home.

Almost one month ago, B.C. became the first province to decriminalize people who use drugs – so they feel able to come forward to family, friends and medical professionals to seek help.

We're saving lives and delivering more services and supports at an unprecedented rate.

Because, Mr. Speaker, all of us know someone who has struggled – or is struggling – with addiction.

It could be a brother, sister, friend or parent.

We also know that a health response is needed – not a criminal justice one.

This budget will help provide specialized health care for people who need it.

A home you can afford

When we think of what it means to build a good life in British Columbia, an affordable home is at the top of the list.

For too long, the housing market worked well for investors, speculators and banks. But it did not work for everyday people.

After five and a half years of work by our government, we are starting to see results.

Forty thousand homes are built or underway.

Construction of new rental housing is at record levels – seven times what it was a decade ago.

In just the past few months, we've removed unfair strata restrictions that keep rentals empty.

And we're setting new housing targets with local governments to keep pace with B.C.'s strong population growth.

Still, Mr. Speaker, new pressures coming out of the pandemic have left too many people struggling to find a decent home, even if they earn a good income.

That needs to change. And it will.

This year's budget will invest \$4.2 billion to deliver homes of all kinds for all British Columbians.

It is centred around a bold housing action plan.

One that builds on our work and takes new steps to deliver more homes.

For middle-class families.

For Indigenous Peoples.

For renters and for those in the greatest need.

We'll clear the way for more housing with zoning changes and a faster permitting process.

And we'll make major new investments to increase housing and services near public transit hubs around the province.

Our plan will also help to ease pressure on local rental markets by building thousands more student housing spaces.

This is on top of the nearly 8,000 student beds already open or underway.

From Okanagan College's campuses in Kelowna, Vernon and Salmon Arm.

To tripling the number of student homes at Abbotsford's University of the Fraser Valley.

I can't forget my stomping grounds. A few months ago, work started on new homes for students at Selkirk College's Castlegar and Nelson campuses.

And the best part? These are all built using mass-timber technology, which creates jobs and helps reduce carbon pollution.

Mr. Speaker, it's clear that homelessness is no longer just a "big city" issue.

What we see happening in communities and on streets throughout the province isn't good for anyone.

Least of all for the people who are living on the street or in dangerous encampments.

This year's budget will fund more supportive housing and strengthen existing programs, which help vulnerable people keep their homes.

We're adding hundreds more units of complex-care housing.

And we're creating new regional teams to help any community dealing with a major encampment.

More support for renters

Mr. Speaker, whether I'm in Victoria or at home in the Kootenays, I often hear the same thing from my neighbours.

People in B.C. are working harder than ever. But many feel like they're just getting by, not getting ahead.

And if you're renting your home, as almost one-third of British Columbians are, every month can feel like a stretch. Never mind saving up for a down payment.

I hear you. Our government is working for you.

Whether you're a young person looking for your first home-away-from-home, a family wanting more space, or a senior enjoying your retirement years.

While some things, like interest rates, are out of our control, we can make other things a little better.

That's why we launched a new \$500-million Rental Protection Fund.

To safeguard people against evictions and rent hikes, while protecting rental buildings for many years to come.

It's why we are making new investments in BC Housing to upgrade older rental buildings, while adding thousands of new rental homes.

And, Mr. Speaker, it's why we are introducing a new renter's tax credit.

The new income-tested credit will put as much as \$400 back into the pockets of low- and moderate-income renters.

We expect this will benefit more than 80% of renters across B.C.

Helping people with costs

The renter's tax credit is just one way we are helping people with the costs of daily life.

We're freezing basic car insurance rates for another two years.

And we provided a \$100 credit to reduce everyone's power bill.

More than 85% of people received the BC Affordability Credit in January, with some families getting up to \$410 dollars.

And, just days ago, we announced another BC Affordability Credit coming in April.

Adults will receive up to \$164 more and children up to \$41.

We know there's much more work to do.

Alongside putting money back in people's pockets, a total of \$4.5 billion in this year's budget will help with the rising cost of essentials.

When it comes to essentials, having full control over your reproductive rights is at the top of the list.

All too often, these fundamental rights are under attack.

Not here in B.C.

Starting April 1, prescription birth control is going to be free in British Columbia.

We know costs vary – but it really adds up.

For someone who pays \$25 a month for birth control pills, that's \$300 in savings every year.

And as much as \$10,000 in savings over their lifetime.

Mr. Speaker, as the mother of two daughters and five granddaughters, I know the effect this is going to have on people's lives in our province.

This is a win for health and it's a win for gender equity in our province.

It's about time. The days of passing down these costs to women and trans and non-binary people are coming to an end.

For the families who feel like they are just getting by – and never getting ahead – we're here for you.

This year's budget delivers an important and permanent lift to the BC Family Benefit – a 10% increase.

Now, parents will receive up to \$1,750 for the first child, \$1,100 for the second and \$900 for the third.

For a family with two kids, the extra \$250 per year can help buy healthy food, pay bills and enrol kids in extracurricular activities.

On top of the 10% increase, single parents will get as much as an extra \$500 dollars a year.

Because while global inflation is stretching most household budgets, it can be really tough for those already struggling to make ends meet.

To tackle food insecurity, we're providing stable funding to expand local school food programs so any child who needs a meal gets one.

And for post-secondary students, we are doubling the student loan maximums and increasing the amount students can make before they need to start repaying their loans.

To help British Columbians relying on income and disability assistance to make ends meet, we are providing more support.

Income and disability rates will be increased, including a 33% lift to the shelter rate.

This marks the fourth increase to rates since 2017.

And we expect it will benefit approximately 160,000 people, including 33,000 children, and help reduce homelessness.

There's always more to do.

That's why we're beginning engagement to update our Poverty Reduction Strategy for March 2024.

All too often, Mr. Speaker, the work of caregivers is not given the respect or compensation that it deserves.

To foster parents and those who look after some of B.C.'s most vulnerable people, thank you.

You are changing lives.

And we are here to support you.

Starting this year, foster families will see their rates increase by 47%.

This will help cover the rising cost of essentials, like food, gas and clothing.

Because youth in care deserve every opportunity to thrive.

Safe and healthy communities

Just as people need to know a good life is within reach in B.C., they need to feel safe in their home and community.

Budget backs our Safer Communities Action Plan with a commitment of \$462 million over three years.

On the enforcement side, we're adding 250 more RCMP members to help keep people safe, especially in rural B.C.

We're implementing new response teams to track, arrest and prosecute repeat violent offenders.

These teams are made up of police, dedicated prosecutors and probation officers.

To improve access to justice, we're continuing to update the Police Act and adding more resources to the BC Human Rights Tribunal.

Over the next two years, another 10 Indigenous Justice Centres will open their doors.

This is in addition to those already serving people in Prince George, Prince Rupert, Merritt and online through an innovative virtual centre.

Addressing the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the justice system is a top priority.

Both for our government and for the B.C. First Nations Justice Council.

Together, we can break the cycle of jail and release. It begins with addressing the poverty, trauma and health issues that brought the person to the justice system in the first place.

Mr. Speaker, when a person's violent or disruptive behaviour results from mental-health and substance use, they need support to get better.

In addition to significant new investments across the spectrum of care, this year's budget will expand the number of mental-health crisis-response teams.

This includes integrated mobile teams, like the successful Car 87 program in Vancouver, which pairs up a police officer with a health worker.

Budget 2023 includes new funding to expand operating hours for the existing Peer Assisted Care Teams on the North Shore and in Victoria and New Westminster.

And it will expand teams to new communities, beginning with three new communities this year.

Budget also provides funding to engage on Indigenous-led civilian crisis-response services.

So people in crisis are met early on by health-care workers and people who understand what they're going through.

This will also free up police to focus on stopping crimes, which makes us all safer.

Strong and clean economy

As we prepare for another year of strong population growth, it's clear that B.C.'s strong and clean economy is attracting talent from around the world.

That's a good thing. We're forecasting one million job openings in the next decade.

People see opportunity here – I couldn't agree more.

We weathered the pandemic with one of the strongest recoveries in Canada.

Vancouver's tech sector is growing at the highest rate in North America.

Last year, we had record-breaking mineral exploration. Funding for a new critical minerals strategy in this year's budget will continue to support the sector.

B.C. is ready to deliver the essential materials needed to help transition away from fossil fuels and grow a clean economy.

Materials like copper for conducting wind power. Nickel for batteries in electric cars. And so much more.

And we'll continue to deliver while meeting B.C.'s exceptionally high standards.

With global uncertainty on the horizon and so many jobs to fill, the safest bet we can make is on the people of B.C.

That is what we're going to do.

Future Ready

Mr. Speaker, this year's budget supports our government's Future Ready plan, coming this spring.

It's a plan to grow the most inclusive and talent-driven workforce in Canada.

And it responds to one of the biggest challenges we're hearing from businesses: better access to more highly skilled workers.

To start, we're attracting new talent by speeding up the recognition of foreign credentials, so internationally trained professionals can get to work, rather than sitting on the sidelines.

I think of Monique, who started her nursing career in the Philippines.

She now has a good job caring for patients in B.C., but the path wasn't straightforward.

Monique is excited about our government's changes to make it easier and faster for qualified, internationally educated nurses to work in our province.

In Monique's words, it will create more opportunities for skilled professionals like her "to establish lives here too. This will benefit everyone in B.C., because more nurses means better health care."

I couldn't agree more.

We are grateful to Monique and so many others who are using their skills and talents to make B.C. a better place.

Mr. Speaker, we're also training the next generation of workers with thousands more seats in high-demand fields.

From health care to tech, and veterinary medicine to early childhood education.

And we're focused on getting more people with multiple barriers and underrepresented groups into the workforce.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that if someone wants to retrain or upgrade their skills, cost shouldn't be a barrier.

Our Future Ready plan will make sure of that.

We're launching a new Future Skills Grant to get people trained and working in high-demand fields.

From programming and software development, to trades, manufacturing and aquaculture. The new grant will help people access the skills they need to succeed – today and in the years to come.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, we recognize businesses have faced their share of difficulties.

Whether its uncertainty brought on by COVID-19, global inflation or a growing labour shortage.

These are major and ongoing challenges. And responding to these needs is a key part of our Future Ready plan.

We'll provide new funding to help small and medium-sized businesses implement solutions to today's labour market challenges and prepare for a changing economy.

Because businesses aren't just going to weather today's storm – they're going to come out of it stronger.

Backed by the diversity, skills and unique strengths from people across the province.

Sustainable economic growth

Mr. Speaker, when we think of tomorrow's economy, sustainability and innovation are top of mind.

In a world shaped by climate change, not only is this a necessity – it's a competitive advantage.

And B.C. is more than ready to deliver.

This year's budget includes \$1 billion over the next three years to fight climate change by building more climate-resilient communities.

Communities that will stand strong in any emergency – whether it be wildfires, heatwaves, or atmospheric rivers.

New investments this year will increase B.C.'s emergency-management capacity and help buy more firefighting equipment.

Mr. Speaker, we must prepare for a changing climate, but we must also do our part to fight climate change.

Because the cost of doing nothing – or not enough – is too high for people and our environment.

And we will, guided by our government's CleanBC Roadmap to 2030.

It's a continent-leading plan to reduce emissions, while creating family-supporting jobs and strong communities.

Budget 2023 builds on our CleanBC commitments with new targeted investments in active transportation networks around the province.

Additionally, the popular CleanBC Go Electric program will continue.

As will pilot projects for heavy-duty electric vehicles, so transportation-based industries can shift away from fossil fuels.

B.C. has always been a leader on climate change and will continue to be in the years ahead.

Because fighting climate change will take all of us working together.

Our CleanBC plan is a key part of Canada's plan, which is part of a global solution to reduce emissions.

But ordinary British Columbians, who are already struggling with rising costs, can't bear the cost burden alone.

That's why we eliminated the largest subsidy to big oil and gas companies and put the money back to work for people.

And that's why as the price on pollution rises, so too will the Climate Action Tax Credit.

Budget 2023 will deliver more money to more households through an enhanced Climate Action Tax Credit.

Where a family of four would have received a total of \$500 last year, that same family will receive almost \$900 starting in July.

By 2030, we expect a significant majority of people who receive the credit will receive more than they pay in carbon tax costs.

Mr. Speaker, people here understand that our natural landscape is a source of incredible beauty.

It's also a wealth of economic opportunity, when done sustainably and responsibly.

And it's where we see the results of a new approach to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.

Whether it's new agreements with Blueberry River First Nations and other Treaty 8 Nations that find a new balance of environmental restoration and resource development.

Or it's the first consent-based, decision-making agreement under the Declaration Act with the Tahltan.

Because we know what doesn't work.

Endless court battles.

Short-term, transactional relationships.

Litigation instead of negotiation.

The future lies in a rights-based partnership approach to decisions respecting land, water and resource stewardship.

That is where we are focusing our work.

To advance our work on old growth and forest stewardship, we are tripling the number of Forest Landscape Planning Tables.

Including eight new planning tables.

This will provide greater opportunity for First Nations, local communities and industry to come together and plan for the future of land management.

We're also ramping up our investments to support innovation in the forest industry.

Just a few weeks ago, we doubled the BC Manufacturing Jobs Fund to \$180 million and opened it up to projects from around the province.

This will help mills move away from old growth logs and toward higher value wood projects, like mass-timber.

Mr. Speaker, when natural resources projects meet our high standards, we want shovels in the ground quickly.

Any delays are just unnecessary barriers to growth.

This year's budget will help speed up the permitting process for natural resources.

Because delays cost money and they slow down our transition to a clean energy future.

Through this year's budget, about 160 new staff members will help move key resource and infrastructure projects forward.

From connectivity to electrification and hydrogen power.

They will also help reform the system so that it works better, and faster, while maintaining B.C.'s high standards.

Building a stronger B.C.

We know that anything built today must meet the demands of a changing climate and a growing population.

It's a high bar – and B.C. is ready to meet it.

With the largest infrastructure investment in our province's history.

If you're looking for good, family-supporting work, British Columbia is the place to be.

We're creating jobs by building hospitals, from Lions Gate to Stuart Lake.

By building schools in fast-growing areas.

By building a fast, reliable transit network, including the Broadway Subway and the Surrey Langley SkyTrain.

And by building homes for generations of British Columbians.

No matter where you live, be it rural or urban, there will be opportunities for you and your family.

Closing

Brick by brick and board by board, we are building a brighter future for everyone who calls our province home.

Because if there's one thing we have learned through these challenging years, it's this:

Going it alone doesn't work.

We are all in this together.

A neighbour's success is your success.

A strong rural B.C. is our entire province's success.

And a growing, secure and clean economy is a success for everyone, today and in the years ahead.

Those are your priorities and they're ours too.

We are all better off when a good life is in reach for all those who call B.C. home.

That is the better, brighter future we all believe in.

And that is the future Budget 2023 delivers.

Thank you.