

Minister David Ramsay: NWT Chamber of Commerce Conference

(April 16, 2015) - Ladies and gentlemen, annual meetings and conferences such as this are an opportunity for us to celebrate milestones, take stock and look ahead.

I would like to do that this morning from a GNWT perspective.

But first my thanks for the opportunity and privilege to address your membership today.

I will be remiss if I did not also recognize the incredible voice and work put forward by this Chamber last year and the collaboration and cooperation that was realized under Alan's guidance.

Finally, to those of you who make up this important organization, my congratulations on the election of your new board – which I had the pleasure of meeting with this morning. Let me be the first to confirm for you that you have identified a competent, energized and committed team to carry the interests of NWT business and our economy into the next year.

April 1st marked our Government's first year with the responsibilities and authorities for land, water and resource management in our Territory.

As you can imagine, it has been a period of significant planning, growth and transition.

But, I believe it has also opened the door for a number of joint and partnered approaches to advancing a new and improved economic environment for NWT residents and their businesses.

Last year, this Chamber and the GNWT began a series of important dialogues to address a number of pressure points impacting the private sector:

- The need for population growth and large scale development;
- The evolution of our regulatory system; and
- Realistic and effective means to address the high costs of doing business in the North.

I committed to your board this morning that these important conversations will continue.

And with this opportunity that I have today, I would like to highlight some of the work that we have already initiated in response to the advocacy and voice of the NWT Chamber in each of these areas.

Let's begin with the need for population growth.

In much of its day to day program delivery, the GNWT carries the goal of making the NWT an attractive place to live and raise a family. Entrepreneurial and business opportunities and supports are available for those who want to take advantage of them; no premiums are payable for health care; early childhood development and education renewal is providing additional means for young families; and support for university and trades training is substantial.

We have upgraded the on-line promotion of the NWT Nominee Program that is helping to realize the immigration of individual skilled and critical impact workers to our Territory. We are taking steps to make our immigrant investment programs more competitive.

And, this year we have expanded the Come Make Your Mark campaign to incorporate the immediate needs of your job sites or businesses as a means to attract new residents and families on line and in target regions and markets.

In addition to a healthy vibrant population, our economy needs us to attract and retain major industrial and infrastructure projects. And, let me assure you that your voice has been heard on this.

One of the unheralded benefits that Devolution has brought is the ownership and authority to more directly promote the incredible potential of our Territory's resource sector.

While our infrastructure gap can be viewed as a challenge to economic progress, it also represents the breadth and value of the potential and opportunity that exists in our Territory and the investment returns that can be realized by investors, corporations and even nations that are interested in partnering and investing in our North.

This is the reality that Premier McLeod and I highlighted in our mission to China and Japan. One that served to open doors with government investors interested in learning more about the exciting opportunities that exist in our Territory's resource sector.

But we also must keep in mind that our definition of large scale development need not be limited to resource development. Investment in transportation, community infrastructure and communications projects also represent business for local contractors, contracts for service suppliers and jobs for residents in impacted communities.

Evidence to this cannot be any clearer than it has been in Inuvik.

In the absence of oil and gas development and exploration, the construction of the new Inuvik school stimulated the town's economy for well over a year. On a lesser scale so did the construction of the Aurora Research Centre, the new hospital and the remote sensing satellite receiving site.

Today, the region is benefiting from joint government investment in the Inuvik to Tuk highway. In the coming year, we will be advancing the construction of the Mackenzie Valley Fibre Optic link.

Meanwhile, in Hay River we have made a commitment to restoring and revitalizing our commercial fishing industry – and to leverage additional investment in a new processing plant and related infrastructure. We are partnering with CanNor in a 2.2 million dollar investment in agriculture that will see the establishment of a permanent campus in Hay River for the Northern Farm Training Institute.

Tangible, shovels-in-the-ground economic benefits are implicit in almost every strategy the GNWT is advancing.

Investments in the health and wellbeing of NWT residents include new hospitals, nursing homes and elder's facilities. Investments in youth and education require new schools and classrooms. Our population growth strategy will drive the need for new houses, condos and apartment buildings. Our commitment to locating government positions closer to the people we serve will realize new and improved offices, facilities and resource centres in communities and regional centres.

In the life of the 17th Legislative Assembly, the GNWT will have delivered, started working on, or committed to, \$1.5 billion in capital projects.

This is what governments do in times of economic slowdown. We get creative – we find new and alternative ways to combine the financial and people power of the private sector with the capacity of government initiatives and investments.

And we have done that.

The third area of identified concern by the NWT Chamber has been our Territory's regulatory system.

To its credit, ours is an integrated and comprehensive system that we are familiar with – and can take part in. It works to ensure resource development decisions in the NWT balance the public interest and are informed by appropriate scientific and technical information, traditional knowledge and public input.

No single interest prevails and authorities, checks and balances are distributed throughout our regulatory process. Most importantly, and something that we must not overlook, it is a system that has evolved and been proven effective in the successful development of our Territory's diamond mines and the other development projects that have built out economy.

We recognize that our regulatory requirements necessitate investments of time and money. Budgets are tight – and when clarity and certainty are in question, companies are easily convinced to take their investment dollars elsewhere.

So, for the past year we have invested in that certainty.

A multi-partner collaboration between government, industry and academia will see a \$5.3 million investment in a drilling and mapping campaign to build the geoscience knowledge base of the Lac de Gras region - a long-proven area of mineral wealth and the location of the NWT's diamond mines.

Our new Geological Materials Storage Facility, pathfinder staff and Mining Industry Advisory Board are all new resources to prospectors and exploration companies – and are being introduced to contribute to increased investor confidence, lowered exploration costs and a reduced environmental footprint from exploration.

And while we have strengthened the integrity of our environmental protections, our investments are also serving to confirm and ensure that such development can happen.

In its introduction of draft Hydraulic Fracturing Filing Regulations, the GNWT is strengthening its commitment to protect the land, water and wildlife of our Territory while balancing our investments in northern development and prosperity.

They will allow us to ensure decisions about hydraulic fracturing in the NWT are even better informed. They will ensure that proponents clearly understand the ongoing requirements and commitments that are expected of them before they prepare and submit their applications.

In doing so, I believe they will offer greater clarity and certainty to decision makers in industry, communities and governments alike.

In all of this, ladies and gentlemen, the Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment is working to improve its supports for businesses and to address the cost of doing businesses in the North.

In the immediate term, the most impactful investments that we can make are in areas of energy conservation and efficiency.

Our government has expanded the operations of the Arctic Energy Alliance with regional offices in Inuvik, Norman Wells, Fort Simpson, Hay River and Whati. And over \$3 million will be invested this year to establish and deliver programs designed to help you reduce your energy use and costs.

The Professional and Financial Support Program has been introduced to connect businesses and entrepreneurs in the NWT's remotest communities with the professional bookkeeping and accounting services and training they say they need.

A new online database has been created to help streamline information about government and private-sector funding programs and services for NWT business and entrepreneurs.

We have advocated on behalf of tourism and agriculture businesses to mitigate WSCC premiums and are currently evaluating our SEED Policy with a view to broadening the scope of our programs and increasing the funding amounts available.

Above all we continue to create and stimulate economic opportunities for every sector with strategic investments in tourism, agriculture, film, manufacturing, fur, fishing and arts and crafts. Each designed to expand these sectors with new opportunities and to establish a competitive business environment in which these opportunities can be identified, pursued and realized.

If there is one thing that I would like to impress on you this morning, it is this.

Your government has a vision – a picture – of an NWT rich in resources and economic opportunity – populated by self-sufficient communities and driven by vibrant health and successful residents and businesses.

We will get there.

Your concerns and feedback are needed to influence and guide how we move our vision forward.

So is your support.

We are reliant on our partners – to work with us – and play a part in realizing this future that we will share.

To work together in order to strengthen and grow our economic capacity.

To lend your voice in support of our decisions - and your resources in support of our people and our communities

We need you to work with us to hire and train the young men and women whose talents and enthusiasm our Territory needs to infuse our future. To look beyond the immediate needs of your job site or office to attract and retain new residents and families to our Territory.

And, to take the approach – always - that we are building: not just businesses but an economy; not just infrastructure but communities – and not just economic opportunity but our Territory's future.