

RE-BUILDING OUR COMMUNITIES – A PATH FORWARD

Introduction

Local governments are a key order of government that provide the foundation for vibrant, sustainable and prosperous communities. From roads and bridges, to sewers and recreation centers, local governments provide the critical infrastructure and core services that businesses and citizens depend on. Through efficient transit services, supports for vulnerable populations, and strong climate leadership, they help create safe and connected communities that draw young families and workers. And through innovative policies and effective planning, they help attract new investments so vital to growing the provincial economy.

As frontline service providers, local governments are uniquely positioned to understand the evolving needs and demands of citizens. They channel that knowledge into action. This has never been more apparent than during the pandemic. Local governments were, and remain, at the forefront of implementing the public health orders that kept communities protected and running, all the while facing significant financial challenges themselves. Home to innovative approaches and solutions, they called for new tools, resources and flexibility to respond to their shared challenges – lost revenue streams; declining transit ridership; escalation of the opioid, homeless and mental health crises; and the need for revitalizing infrastructure stimulus.

As all orders of government turn their attention to re-starting and re-building the economy, there is an unprecedented opportunity to partner in creating the communities our residents expect – ones that are economically viable, environmentally responsible, and socially rich and inclusive. No one order of government can address the myriad of challenges facing our residents alone. We must work together – through collaborative, consultative and integrated approaches – to protect and improve the quality of life for all British Columbians.

As the cornerstones of communities, British Columbia's local governments are committed to creating a strong, secure and thriving British Columbia in partnership with the Province.

The Path Forward

Re-building and strengthening the economy is critical to the well-being of British Columbians. Key measures are required to support a return to the workplace, the restarting of businesses, and the development of new economic opportunities that benefit all of our communities.

To support a sustainable and prosperous recovery from the pandemic, our communities need accessible and reliable transit services, universal broadband to attract new businesses, and economic diversification supports for transitioning economies. They need long-term and sustainable infrastructure investment to sustain core services, and financial support for the hardest hit sector, tourism. Affordable, comprehensive and convenient childcare is key to ensuring all parents can fully participate in the economic recovery, as are new pathways for creating a low carbon economy which reduces

emissions and creates weather resilient communities. And to support those most in need and enhance community safety, local governments need a new strategy for providing protective and health services.

1. Recovery Through Infrastructure Stimulus & Investment

Local infrastructure has, and continues to be, the foundation on which British Columbia's economy rests. Reliable infrastructure and modern transportation networks are critical to the efficient flow of goods and people. State of the art recreation and cultural facilities help businesses attract skilled labour and young families. Upgraded water and sewage plans support healthy populations and protect the environment. However, the pandemic placed financial stress on community infrastructure throughout the province – as local governments re-evaluated capital spending, shelved discretionary projects, or diverted funds from capital projects to operations. An infrastructure stimulus framework is widely supported by local governments as vital to a post-pandemic recovery. Building and renewing infrastructure historically generates significant economic returns for communities, as it stimulates the local multiplier effect, produces new business spin-offs and jobs, and creates much needed community assets.

The recent investment announcement of \$418 million in community infrastructure as part of the overall \$1.5 billion provincial economic recovery plan is key to revitalizing community infrastructure and supporting a return to work. While this funding constitutes a significant investment, local governments are calling for additional and long-term infrastructure funding – as they seek to re-build, address new service demands, meet new regulatory requirements, and confront an infrastructure deficit.

To create the foundations for long-term sustainability and growth, all provincial political parties must commit to:

- I. Preserving the community infrastructure investment within the Province's \$1.5 billion economic recovery plan and ensuring its flow through to local governments.***
- II. Creating a provincial infrastructure stimulus framework which maximizes local government choice and flexibility in ensuring funds are invested in the areas with the greatest need and economic return. The framework would:***
 - include flexibility on project category, eligible costs, procurement and timelines;***
 - provide 100% funding for any recovery program and/or current infrastructure program;***
 - support shovel worthy projects over shovel ready projects and removes existing federal stacking rules; and***
 - employ the current Gas Tax funding model.***

2. Supporting Economic Diversification

With continued global economic uncertainty, the resilience of local economies has been at the forefront of civic agendas. Many resource dependent communities are struggling to maintain their economic viability in the face of depleting resources, restructuring industries and shrinking population. The onset of the pandemic further highlighted the challenges of single industry communities – and the need to re-focus local economies and diversify away from declining resource sectors. BC’s communities need support in identifying emerging economic development opportunities, and in planning, co-ordinating and delivering strategies that will attract new investment. They also need help in building a stronger and more resilient tourism sector – which has been devastated by the pandemic with mass layoffs and business closures, with the ripple effects those bring to communities.

To support a re-focussing and diversification of local economies, and re-building of the tourism sector, all provincial political parties must commit to:

- I. Working with local governments in developing transition plans and long-term economic development strategies in response to the changing resource sector.***
- II. Providing the capacity building resources for local governments to implement those plans.***
- III. Resources to create new tourism infrastructure, partnerships, destination development, skills training, and tour operator financial support.***

3. Re-Building Public Transit

Affordable, accessible and reliable transit is vital to the economic recovery of communities – it transports workers, connects people, and reduces carbon footprints. Throughout the pandemic, transit dependent communities suffered greatly from a loss of ridership and revenue that undermined the financial stability of transit services. The joint federal-provincial injection of \$1 billion into supporting BC Transit, TransLink and BC Ferries was a significant investment and operating relief for local governments. While this capital stemmed the financial hemorrhaging, there remains ongoing ridership challenges for communities as they fully recover.

In order to re-build and create sustainable transit throughout the province, all provincial political parties must commit to:

- I. Developing a provincial re-building strategy that seeks to strengthen transit funding models by creating new revenue tools for local governments that reduce the reliance on ridership fares.***

4. Ensuring Rural Connectivity

The pandemic amplified the internet connectivity issues already facing many rural and remote areas. Faced with a shift to working from home, and online purchasing and service delivery, local governments and businesses alike struggled in communities without reliable internet. Affordable and accessible high-speed internet connections are critical to local government operations and services, and vital for recruiting and retaining the businesses necessary for a full economic recovery.

To advance universal broadband connectivity and support future growth, all provincial political parties must commit to:

- I. Mandating service providers to make full use of under-utilized network infrastructure, which will augment existing programs that focus on finalizing backbone and last-mile network infrastructure.***

5. A Responsive Opioid & Mental Health Strategy

British Columbia has long suffered from an opioid and mental health crisis that has touched all communities. In any given year, mental health and substance abuse problems affect one in five British Columbians directly, and almost everyone indirectly. However, the onset of the pandemic has dramatically amplified the scope and impact of the opioid and mental health crisis – with increased overdoses, a growth of homeless encampments, and a rise in social disorder. Local fire and police forces were increasingly called out for these mental health and addiction related issues. As a result, local governments have incurred additional protective and health service costs in assisting the most vulnerable in their communities – at a time when COVID-19 already weighed heavily on their budgets.

To effectively respond to the opioid and mental health crisis, all parties must commit to:

- I. Developing a comprehensive strategy for the provision of protective and health services which includes:***
 - sustained funding for the opioid crisis;***
 - implementing a province-wide agreement between police and mental health officials on the management of mental health patients in emergency ward;***
 - creating integrated teams of health, police, and other officials on a twenty-four (24) hour basis to manage individuals with mental health issues; and***
 - introducing additional long-term care beds to address mental health cases.***

6. Reducing Emissions & Readying Communities

Local governments realize that strong climate leadership is critical to promoting the health and well-being of their communities, creating new economic opportunities, and fostering weather resilient communities. Even when faced with a pandemic, communities remain resolute in their desire for climate action. Over the past decade, local governments have demonstrated their leadership in institutionalizing climate action into their core operations and services – through land-use planning, developing green infrastructure, and promoting renewable energy use. Increasingly, they are seeking to take climate action to the next level in their communities – and to support provincial efforts to do the same. BC’s local governments want new ways of reducing emissions, fostering green innovation, and adapting to the increased scope and frequency of floods, droughts and wildfires. Creating a low carbon culture and clean economy is key to fostering this resiliency while simultaneously stimulating job creation and economic growth.

To help build a low carbon economy and weather resilient communities, all provincial political parties must commit to:

- I. ***Provincial engagement on UBCM’s Special Committee on Climate Action recommendations that identify new pathways of action for buildings, transportation, solid waste, resilience, governance and social mobilization.***