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PROVINCIAL THRONE SPEECH: *Highlights of Interest to Local Government*

The Honourable Iona Campagnola, Lieutenant Governor, presented the Speech from the Throne on February 11, 2003.

The overriding theme in the Throne Speech was Opening Up the province to new approaches, new solutions and new partnerships.

"The world will open up for us as we open up our province to all British Columbians and to the world. That is our central strategic imperative. It is the mission to open up British Columbia to the wealth of opportunities that lie in wait of our discovery.

We must open up our minds to new ways of meeting our common interests. We must open up our province to new partnerships with First Nations, other governments and private enterprise.

This is the government's overriding vision: to open up every region and every community to new horizons of hope. To open up every sector of our economy to new opportunities, wherever they exist. To open up the free flow of people, goods and services within our province and with our trading partners. To open up every region of BC to visitors from around the globe through a successful 2010 Olympic bid."

Opening up - Our Democratic Institutions

The government proposed a number of initiatives to open up government and enhance citizen involvement:

- Dialogue on Crime which will bring together community leaders, MLAs, law enforcement experts and others in pursuit of better ways to prevent and combat crime in our schools and on our streets. Accompanying legislation will be introduced to assist police to better manage and track information on criminals, suspects, and sentencing conditions imposed by courts.

- Seniors and Youth Congress
- Citizens Assembly will be established to examine and make recommendations on electoral reform. The process will be initiated within the next few weeks along with the release of Gordon Gibson's report on this matter.

Opening Up - New Partnerships with Local Governments

Your government will also open up new partnerships with local governments. A new Community Charter will shortly be introduced to give local governments greater autonomy, new planning tools, and new sources of revenue.

New partnerships will also be opened up with the private sector. Partnerships BC will aggressively pursue public-private partnerships that will improve customer services, maximize private sector investment and minimize costs to taxpayers.

While public-private partnerships are already underway with a new ambulatory care centre in Vancouver and a new Fraser Valley Health Centre, new public-private partnerships will be actively sought this year in transportation, health care, information technology, housing, and land and resource development.

Opening Up - New Hope for Sustainable, Accessible Health Care

The government acknowledges that no area is in more dire need of reform than health care. The Speech points to the new Health Accord reached with the federal government and the provincial premiers, which will bring additional federal dollars into the BC health system. The Accord is seen as a helpful new approach and an indicator of an improved cooperative relationship, although it is not a complete solution to the province's health system sustainability problems.

With respect to health care reform, the government referenced a number of initiatives including:

- accessible sources of information and programs to help promote health and wellness including 24/7 BC NurseLine, the BC HealthGuide, the Aboriginal Companion handbook, and new programs aimed at early childhood development and the Action Schools project;
- the initiation later in the year of a new strategy for Chronic Disease Prevention and Management;
- yet to be specified measures being taken to strengthen BC's Ambulance Service;
- continued development of independent living options for seniors; and
- introduction of an income-based Fair PharmaCare Plan that will provide additional benefits to people living on fixed and lower incomes.

Opening Up - Recognition and Reconciliation with First Nations

The government indicated its intention to work in partnership with First Nations and provide a new level of economic opportunity for their communities. A three-year, \$30 million Economic Measures Fund has been established to help First Nations pursue economic opportunities. This funding will be indefinitely extended with an additional \$10 million per year. Acknowledging its legal duty to consult and accommodate First Nations where their rights may be affected, the government indicated its intention to:

- provide funding to support Aboriginal involvement in oil and gas, tourism, forestry, fish aquaculture and the Olympic bid;

- work to expand First Nations' involvement in the co-management of parks and recreational services;
- double the funding for the First Citizens' Fund from \$35 to \$72 million;
- introduce significant reforms to ensure that more access to logging and forest opportunities is available to First Nations; and
- earmark funding in the budget for revenue sharing arrangements with First Nations that wish to help revitalize the forest industry in their traditional territories. The Speech notes that "(T)he distribution of that revenue will be negotiated with First Nations in exchange for legal certainty that allows all regions and all British Columbians to more fairly prosper from their resource industries."

Opening Up - The Canada-British Columbia Partnership

The Speech identified a number of areas for new federal-provincial partnerships:

- Life Sciences Initiative - research in the life sciences critical to our traditional resource industries;
- Transportation - improvements to the Trans Canada highway (Kicking Horse Canyon) were identified as the top funding priority;
- work to harmonize environmental assessment;
- improve fisheries management;
- hope to enter into a new multi-year national agriculture policy to improve food safety, quality, and environmental sustainability; and
- explore potential for a new national park in the Okanagan; as well as new marine parks to protect some of our most valuable marine ecosystems.

Opening Up - Our Transportation Infrastructure

The government's plans to improve BC's transportation system were backed by a commitment to dedicate funding from fuel tax revenue. Plans include:

- opening up the North with major improvements to rural roads, new access to oil and gas fields, and the completion of the new Nisga'a highway;
- integrated rail network that improves service and protects public ownership of the BC Rail lines, beds and rights-of-way;

- new investments in border infrastructure;
- greater choice, competition and better service through the new BC Ferries Services for the Island and Coast; and
- continue to work to ensure our airports become the regional social and economic engines they should be.

Opening Up - Revitalized Forest Industry

With respect to forestry the government committed to introduce legislation to create a working forest land base for forest companies, forest workers and communities throughout the heartlands of BC.

It also confirmed the government's direction to:

- diversify tenure and move towards market-based stumpage that is regionally sensitive and socially responsible;
- more timber will be available for innovative, smaller, local operators through BC Timber Sales Program and also for First Nations;
- fair compensation will be assured for existing tenure holders that recognizes both the benefits and costs of reform;
- eliminate water bedding, cut controls and appurtenancy requirements; and
- maintain current restrictions on export of logs from Crown lands.

Recognizing that these measures will not be easy, painless or welcomed by all, the government acknowledged that restructuring of this magnitude will result in some short-term dislocation. The government has indicated that it will work with labour, the federal government and industry representatives to try and mitigate the trauma of change on people's lives and in our heartlands communities.

Opening Up - BC's Heartlands to Economic Growth

Through the Ministry of Competition, Science and Enterprise economic development plans throughout the province will be completed and implemented. Elements of the BC Heartlands Economic Strategy include:

- implementation of the new Energy Policy - new investments in independent power production; new legislation

- to provide for energy opportunities in coalbed methane; and government indicated its desire to have the offshore oil and gas industry up and running, environmentally sound, and booming with job creation by 2010;
- doubling of the tourism industry by 2010 with the development of a new Recreational Stewardship Plan that will make BC's parks major magnets for tourism; and
- establishing a BC Resort Task Force composed of government, First Nations and Resort Communities across BC to develop new programs to ensure that BC's resort potential is fully met.

Also of interest to local governments, the government indicated that it will:

- continue to streamline and modernize regulation and encourage business investment and job creation;
- table amendments to the Coal Act, the Mineral Tenure Act, the Mines Act, and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Act to streamline administration and stimulate investment in those sectors;
- introduce new legislative measures that will open up ICBC, BC Ferries and BC Hydro to independent regulatory oversight that better protects ratepayers, free of political interference;
- introduce legislation to open up fair and transparent government procurement practices; modernize the Waste Management Act; improve contaminated sites regulation; streamline and strengthen the Pesticide Control Act; and enhance planning for agriculture and right to farming;
- consolidate all childcare services under the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services; and
- expand high speed internet access to all areas of the province.

The full text of the Throne Speech can be accessed on the government website at:
www.legis.gov.bc.ca/37th4th/4-8-37-4.htm