



15th Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories

Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight

Progress Report on
Priorities and Objectives (2006)

Chair: Mr. Kevin Menicoche

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SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Mr. Speaker:

Your Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight is pleased to provide its Progress Report on Priorities and Objectives and commends it to the House.

Kevin Menicoche, MLA
Chairperson

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT**

**PROGRESS REPORT ON
PRIORITIES AND OBJECTIVES**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Background..... 1

Progress on Committee Priorities2

 Human Resources.....3

 A Review of All GNWT Boards and Agencies3

 A Review of the Operations and Mandate of the NWT Housing Corporation,
 Including the Rent Scales for Social Housing..... 3

 An Operational Review of the Workers' Compensation Board and
 Completion of the Amendments to the Legislation 4

 Consideration of New Legislation to Protect Whistleblowers..... 4

 Review of the *Liquor Act*.....4

 Review of the *Residential Tenancies Act*4

 Cost/Benefit Analysis of Business Incentive Policy 4

 Improving the Land Transfer Process and, in Particular, Accelerating
 Land Transfers to Municipalities5

 Increased Investment in Early Childhood Development Programs.....5

 Construction of an All-Weather Road Between Tuktoyaktyuk and Inuvik..... 5

 Increased Programming for Drug and Alcohol Addictions Rehabilitation
 and Treatment 5

 Adequate Resources for Transition Houses for Victims of Domestic
 Violence..... 6

 Reduction of the Infrastructure Deficit 6

 Role for Elders in NWT Government 6

 Equal Access to Student Financial Assistance for Trades Students and
 Persons With Disabilities 6

 Increased Investment in Trades and Apprenticeship Programs 6

 Facilities for Seniors 6

 Introduction of Measures to Mitigate the Impacts of Past Hydro Projects..... 7

 Development of a Hydro Project on the Bear River 7

 Adequate Resources for Dust Control in Communities 7

 On-going Objectives 7

New Priority: Adequate Support for Frontline Organizations.....	7
Other Activities.....	8
Energy and Cost of Living	9
Beverage Container Recovery Program.....	9
Northern Residents Tax Deduction.....	9
Conclusion	9

PROGRESS REPORT ON PRIORITIES AND OBJECTIVES

INTRODUCTION

In April 2004, the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight held a two-day operational planning workshop to review its mandate and set its priorities and objectives for the 15th Assembly. These plans were shared with our colleagues and the public in our first Report on Priorities and Objectives, which we presented to the Legislative Assembly on June 1, 2004.

The Committee held its second operational and strategic planning workshop in Tuktoyaktuk from April 15 to 17, 2005, at which time we reviewed progress made to date on our priorities and objectives. A progress report followed on June 2, 2005.

The third annual workshop took place in Fort Simpson from April 10-12, 2006. This report summarizes our progress on priorities as we see it. It also outlines changes we have made to our priorities, including the adoption of a new priority: adequate support for frontline organizations.

BACKGROUND

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight includes all eleven Regular Members. Its mandate as set out in the *Rules of the Legislative Assembly* is to:

1. Review issues which have government-wide implications, including the overview of the budget and fiscal framework;
2. Review multi-year business plans, budgets and Bills of the Department of the Executive (including the Executive Offices, the Financial Management Board Secretariat and the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs), and of the Department of Finance;
3. Consider the budgets and financial management of any other boards and agencies that are outside the responsibility of any standing committee;
4. Examine the reports on the annual financial statements and public accounts of the Government of the Northwest Territories and the report of the Auditor General.
5. Review government reports on financial and performance results on program and policy evaluations to ensure anticipated outcomes are being achieved and accountability is maximized;

6. Review, as necessary or appropriate, the annual and other reports of statutory offices of the Legislative Assembly, including the Commissioner of Official Languages, the Conflict of Interest Commissioner, the Information and Privacy Commissioner, the Equal Pay Commissioner and the Human Rights Commission;
7. Coordinate House business, scheduling and planning in cooperation with appropriate Cabinet representatives; and,
8. Consider any other matters referred by the House.

The Vision adopted by the Committee in April 2004 is:

A strong, effective consensus government that has the confidence of the people of the NWT.

Our Mission is:

To take purposeful and unified action, where appropriate, to support, question or oppose government initiatives and to hold government accountable. We will also use our collective power to influence government to take action and/or to change its policies when in the public interest.

PROGRESS ON COMMITTEE PRIORITIES

As we stated in our June 2004 Report on Priorities and Objectives, our key priority is:

Holding government accountable to our collective 15th Assembly vision and goals

The Standing Committee accomplishes this through a number of regular activities and, in particular, the annual review of the Government's draft business plans. In the fall of 2005, the Committee implemented the first ever pre-budget consultations, which added a new element of public input into the planning and accountability for Government use of resources.

The Committee also holds government accountable through its input on policy, program and legislative initiatives, by organizing theme days on various topics, and by formal motions in the Assembly directing the Government to take specific actions.

The Committee continues to see our constitutional evolution and the negotiation of a fair devolution and resource revenue sharing deal for our Territory as key to achieving our collective vision, and continues to support the principle that the people of the Northwest Territories should be the primary beneficiaries of the development of our resources.

The following summarizes progress on our other priorities:

Human Resources

Effective April 1, 2006, a new Department of Human Resources was created, with the Committee's support. The Committee will continue to monitor the new Department closely to ensure that it does result in a more efficient and accountable system. In particular, we would encourage the Government to task the new Department with re-examining the Affirmative Action Policy and bringing forward options for discussion within the life of this Assembly.

A Review of All GNWT Boards and Agencies

The Joint Cabinet/AOC Working Group has now concluded its mandate and advanced a great deal of work on data gathering and preparing a new Governance Framework for Boards and Agencies, including a policy on boards and agencies. The Committee urges the Government to implement the Working Group's recommendations for additional resources to better coordinate boards and agencies.

A Review of the Operations and Mandate of the NWT Housing Corporation, Including the Rent Scales for Social Housing

Committee Members have raised a number of serious concerns with the NWT Housing Corporation to which we have not received satisfactory responses from the Minister and Government. This led us to bring forward a formal motion on March 2, 2006 requesting a performance audit of the Corporation by the Auditor General for Canada.

Public consultation was recently conducted on the NWT Housing Corporation's mandate. The Committee looks forward to the results of this consultation later this year.

An Operational Review of the Workers' Compensation Board and Completion of the Amendments to the Legislation

The Committee looks forward to reviewing the Auditor General's report on the performance audit of the Worker's Compensation Board.

Members continue to be concerned that they have heard little from Government about the status of the rewrite of the *Workers' Compensation Act*, which is needed to address several outstanding issues and complete the work begun in the 14th Assembly. The Committee has communicated to the Government that we expect them to introduce a Bill in October 2006.

Consideration of New Legislation to Protect Whistleblowers

Members continue to believe consideration of such legislation is timely, both because of local issues and national trends toward increased accountability expectations from the public service, most recently evidenced by the "sponsorship scandal". The Committee has asked the Government to bring forward a public discussion paper on whistleblower legislation prior to the October 2006 sitting.

Review of the *Liquor Act*

The Committee has communicated to Government that we expect them to introduce this legislation in the October 2006 sitting.

Review of the *Residential Tenancies Act*

The Committee has communicated to Government that we expect them to introduce a Bill during the life of this Assembly.

Cost/Benefit Analysis of Business Incentive Policy

The Committee has received the Government's cost/benefit analysis of the Business Incentive Policy and is aware that there is a great deal of apprehension among northern business owners about its future. Members look forward to seeing the results of the Government's consultations before the October 2006 sitting.

Improving the Land Transfer Process and, in Particular, Accelerating Land Transfers to Municipalities

The Committee is concerned that progress on this initiative is not keeping up with the demand for land, especially for housing. More coordination and streamlining of the land transfer process are needed if housing initiatives are to succeed.

Increased Investment in Early Childhood Development Programs

While the future of the Federal Day Care Program is uncertain with the recent change of government in Ottawa, the Committee encourages the Minister to continue lobbying Canada for reasonable base funding for the NWT for early childhood development.

In addition to the lack of adequate program funding, many communities lack child care facilities. This is something the Committee believes the Government can do something about now, by allowing surplus Government infrastructure and public housing to be used for childcare programs. The Committee urges the Government to come forward with a Child Care Infrastructure Policy to make these facilities available.

Construction of an All-Weather Road Between Tuktoyaktuk and Inuvik

The Committee was pleased to see the November 2005 “Connecting Canada Coast to Coast to Coast” proposal by the GNWT to the Government of Canada and continues to affirm its support for construction of an all-weather road between Tuktoyaktuk and Inuvik.

Increased Programming for Drug and Alcohol Addictions Rehabilitation and Treatment

The Committee is frustrated with the Government’s consistent refusal to act on our recommendations for additional drug and alcohol treatment facilities. With the recent release of the Chalmers report, the Government appears to have dug in its heels even further in its determination to invest almost exclusively in community-based services. Members sincerely believe this is the wrong approach for the NWT, based on what we have heard from our constituents, and on our own experiences. In the absence of regional, culturally-appropriate treatment facilities, we fear that many residents will never have the support they need to win their battle with addictions.

The Committee supported a motion on February 27, 2006:

That this Assembly reaffirms its motion of October 29, 2004 requesting that the Government establish a centre dedicated to treating addictions to drugs other than alcohol, establish an addictions treatment centre specifically for youth and reopen residential treatment centres in Yellowknife and Inuvik.

Adequate Resources for Transition Houses for Victims of Domestic Violence

During its pre-budget consultations, the Committee heard from transition houses that are struggling to meet the needs of clients in crisis with inadequate resources for programming, staffing and basic infrastructure maintenance. Their concerns are outlined in detail in the Committee's October 2005 Report on Pre-Budget Consultations. The Committee understands there has been some progress in shortening the amount of time it takes for shelters to receive their funding, however, we remain concerned about the overall adequacy of funding to transition shelters.

Reduction of the Infrastructure Deficit

Years of fiscal restraint have left the NWT with a serious infrastructure deficit. Many communities are lacking facilities, while many existing public buildings are in serious disrepair. The Committee is therefore pleased to see the amount of the GNWT's resources as well as new federal funding now being directed to capital projects.

Role for Elders in NWT Government

Committee Members believe that elders have a great deal of knowledge to offer the Government, particularly on issues such as climate change and wildlife management. The Committee requests that the Government initiate a formal consultation process with elders to ensure they are given appropriate recognition and respect in our institutions, and that their knowledge informs our policy-making.

Equal Access to Student Financial Assistance for Trades Students and Persons With Disabilities

Increased Investment in Trades and Apprenticeship Programs

Facilities for Seniors

The Standing Committee on Social Programs will pursue these priorities.

Introduction of Measures to Mitigate the Impacts of Past Hydro Projects

Development of a Hydro Project on the Bear River

Adequate Resources for Dust Control in Communities

The Standing Committee on Governance and Economic Development will pursue these priorities.

On-going Objectives

The Committee will also continue to pursue the objectives explicitly included in our mandate, which are:

- The comprehensive overview of the GNWT's budget and fiscal framework;
- The consideration of Bills, budgets and financial management of the Department of the Executive (including the Executive Offices, the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, and the Financial Management Board Secretariat) and the Department of Finance;
- Examination of Auditor General's reports;
- Examination of the reports of statutory offices including the Commissioner of Official Languages, the Conflict of Interest Commissioner, the Information and Privacy Commissioner, the Equal Pay Commissioner and the Human Rights Commission; and
- Coordination of House Business scheduling and planning in cooperation with Cabinet.

NEW PRIORITY: ADEQUATE SUPPORT FOR FRONTLINE ORGANIZATIONS

During its 2005 pre-budget consultations, the Committee received presentations from frontline organizations in several communities raising concerns about the level of support they are receiving from Government. Staffing is an especially acute problem for non-governmental organizations and will rise to crisis level if they continue to lack the resources to offer competitive wages and benefits in order to recruit and retain qualified staff. Additional concerns, which are outlined in detail in the Committee's October 2005 Report on Pre-Budget Consultations, included:

- Overall inadequacy of funding, particularly as this limits their ability to provide holistic programming to meet clients' multiple needs;
- The need for multi-year funding arrangements;
- The administrative burden associated with having to apply to and meet the accountability requirements of multiple programs, particularly where programs have not been designed to fit clients' actual needs; and
- The need for more direct involvement of frontline organizations in the GNWT's planning exercises.

The Committee sees frontline organizations as key to the success of many of the Assembly's goals: they are delivering some of our most essential services and have the best knowledge of their clients' needs. Moreover, they are made up of highly dedicated people who are providing programs far more effectively and at far less cost than if Government were to try to achieve the same results on its own. It is critical that we support their efforts and ensure they continue to be viable.

The Committee understands that the Government is developing and implementing new funding criteria and approaches for frontline organizations. We look forward to hearing from these organizations again during this year's pre-budget consultations on whether they have experienced any improvements as a result of the changes made by the GNWT.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Over the course of the last year, the Standing Committee has continued to move its priorities forward through "theme days". A theme day is when Regular Members decide to collectively focus on a particular issue in the House through Members' Statements, Oral Questions, and/or debate on Motions. This provides an opportunity to raise the profile of a given issue with the Government and with the public.

A Motion during the formal Session of the Legislative Assembly is a proposal for the Assembly to do something, order something to be done or express an opinion on an issue that is presented to the Assembly for a decision. Following the introduction of the motion, there is an opportunity to debate it and then a vote.

In addition to the Motions mentioned in earlier sections of this Report, the Committee supported the following:

Energy and Cost of Living

This motion, carried October 24, 2005, called on the Government to develop comprehensive strategies to address energy costs and the overall cost of living, and to present those strategies to the Committee in public meetings. As a result, public meetings did take place in November 2005 and January 2006, and a great deal of information presented at those meetings is publicly available on the Government's website.

Beverage Container Recovery Program

This motion, carried October 26, 2005, called on the Government to delay implementation of the Beverage Container Recovery Program in every community without an approved depot until such time as a local depot became available. Although the Government proceeded to implement the program territory-wide, the motion did press the Minister and Department to come up with interim arrangements for several communities to ensure residents could receive refunds for their recycled containers.

Northern Residents Tax Deduction

This motion, carried on February 9, 2006, called for the Premier and Minister of Finance to begin working with their counterparts to lobby the federal government to increase the Northern Residents' Tax Deduction and to index it annually in the future to keep pace with the cost of living.

CONCLUSION

With just over a year remaining in the life of the 15th Assembly, the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight looks forward to seeing significant progress on several priorities between now and the end of 2006 and to working with the Government to address the many outstanding priorities and objectives noted above.

Recommendation

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight recommends that pursuant to Rule 93(5), the GNWT table a comprehensive response to this report within 120 calendar days.