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Hon. I. Chong: I will begin my response to the throne speech this morning, as I have done in the last dozen responses, by first of all congratulating you, Madam Speaker, on being reappointed as Assistant Deputy Speaker and, of course, the member for Kelowna-Mission as Deputy Speaker of this House. We were served well by you in our first session, and I expect the same to occur this following session.

[1055]

It is always a pleasure to be able to rise to respond to the throne speech, because each and every one of us in this House has a very distinct privilege and honour. I say this each and every time because it is worthy of reminder. There are over four million people in this province and only 79 jobs in this Legislature, and each one of us gets to have one of those. That, to me, is a great honour. That, to me, is a great privilege. To be able to come to this Legislature; to represent your constituents of 30,000, 40,000, 50,000, 60,000 people; to be able to debate public policy; to be able to participate in shaping our province — this is very important. This is a duty and an honour that none of us should take for granted. I'm always pleased to be able to be here to do that.

Every year I listened to the throne speech when I was in opposition. As you well know, there are things that you can agree with and things that you don't agree with. I know it's natural for the members of the opposition to disagree and to oppose. That's to be expected. But I had thought that this time it would be a little bit different, because I heard the NDP opposition leader say that she wanted to propose and not to oppose. All I have heard is "oppose." I've heard very little about proposing. I will get to that in short order. The small amounts of proposition I did hear were, in fact, very alarming.

The throne speech didn't have an opportunity to speak to a number of the things that our government is doing, a number of things that each of our ministries is doing, so I want to take an opportunity to share with members of this Legislature what is going on in our ministry, the Ministry of Community Services, as well as the Ministry Responsible for Seniors' and Women's Issues.

I'm particularly proud of the public servants who work in this ministry. They're dedicated; they're hard-working; they're committed; they're passionate. When I meet with them on a daily basis — sometimes three or four times during the day — they, each and every one of them, come into our office with such a sense of dedication that I think it's worthy of note. If they're listening, I want them to know how much I appreciate the work they do to help me do the job that I have to do.

As I looked at the throne speech and heard Her Honour speak on it, I couldn't help but reflect back on the number of years when there was very little vision back in the 1990s, when there was very little leadership. While I know opposition members are grasping for things that they can extrapolate on, what they are failing to see is that vision and leadership are not about this upcoming or ensuing year, it's not about six months, or it's not about just going to the next election

— which is May 2009, and they all know that. It's about going beyond this term. It's about the next decade and perhaps even beyond. It's about charting a future that we can all be proud of. It's about leaving a legacy that we can all be proud of. As I say, we have a unique opportunity to be in this House, so it means we have a unique opportunity to leave a legacy.

I have heard the Premier time and time again, as he goes around the province, when he speaks to groups, when he speaks to small, individual groups or large organizations. He says with such passion and conviction that he wants to leave this province in better shape than when he came into this place and that he wants to see the next generation of young people benefit as he was able to benefit as a young boy, as a young man and now as, I think, a young adult still. He says so, and he believes it, which is why the throne speech is visionary, which is why the throne speech talks about things and talks about — yes — transformation.

Transformation is about looking beyond one year, looking beyond one term. It means going out beyond and being bold. Sometimes it's not easy to be bold. You get people coming after you. You get critics telling you that everything you're doing is wrong. It takes a true leader to be bold, and that's what we have in this Premier.

Our government's goal is to ensure that British Columbia continues to lead, that British Columbia is held up in high regard. I remember when I was in opposition. I think it was an article in the *Economist* that really said that British Columbia was the laughingstock of the world in terms of economic policies — just in terms of our performance. I just don't know how the NDP government of the day could accept that, could not want to make change, could not want to be a leader. Unfortunately, they maintained the status quo, and they didn't move ahead.

[1100]

That's not what we want. Our government wants to ensure that British Columbia is known for its innovation, is known for its inspiration and is known for its wealth creation. People around the world are beginning to notice. If you take a look, though, just outside the borders of British Columbia, which we sometimes get so consumed by.... If you take a look across the country.... When you take a look at international magazines and articles that are being written, people are saying that British Columbia is the province in Canada, is the leader in Canada. They are asking some of our people who work for us in the ministry exactly what it is we're doing to make this innovation, to make this change, to become in four short years a leader once again — a spot that we have deserved for many years but were left without during the dismal '90s.

We know we have achieved success in a number of areas, but that is not to say we should sit and rest on our laurels. We know that we have the lowest unemployment rate. Does that mean we shouldn't still look at job creation? No, it means we still want the highest job creation per capita. That's one of our goals, and we're going to maintain that.

That goal is not just to have achieved it but to continue to sustain it — yes, sustain. There's another word

that the opposition is so fearful of: "sustainability." Well, I hear them talk about sustainability in a number of things. There is no code word to it. Sustainability means just that. It's about the long term, a long-term vision.

Sustainability and having a low unemployment rate mean that more British Columbians are working. It means more British Columbians are contributing to their local communities than ever before. It means more British Columbians can support their families and have a quality of life that they want, that they can contribute to their communities, that their communities can flourish.

I am proud, you know, that I live here in the capital region of Victoria and that we have an unemployment rate of just 4 percent. It's another record low. In fact, as I understand it, it has dropped every single year since 2002 here in Victoria, and I would say that the rest of Vancouver Island is doing as well in terms of having low unemployment rates. Certainly, we will see challenges, because around us things are changing. But the fact that we can diversify, the fact that there are opportunities, means that we have to be ready to accept that. It means we have to be ready to work with our local governments, our local communities, to see that their communities can thrive.

We are a progressive government, Madam Speaker. We are progressive in that we want to continue to work at improving the economy. We want to continue to improve the economy because we know that with that we can have the financial resources not just for the job creation but to provide the support programs that everyone so dearly wants and talks about. Health care, education, social support systems — where do these programs get support from? It does come from the financial resources that are available to us. It comes from taxation. It comes from investment. These are things that are returning to our province.

Over the past eight months I have been able to, particularly, meet with British Columbians from all walks of life, from various diverse communities, from all age groups in the ministry that I'm involved with. As a government, I have heard from many of them who have said that we must continue with the remarkable changes we have been able to accomplish in the past four and a half years. They have told me that they believe in economic revitalization. They believe in fiscal renewal. They believe that social achievements can continue and must continue. I do hear optimism as I travel around the province. I don't hear the doom and gloom as some members of the opposition would have us believe takes place. There is pride in communities. There is confidence in communities.

[1105]

That's not to say that there still aren't challenges and that we are not still listening to those challenges. We will help those communities overcome those, but in order to do that, we are going to have to take a look at some fundamental changes. It means that we are going to have to explore and accept that there will be change.

We are no longer in the 20th century. Y2K happened six years ago. We are in the 21st century. The

global economy around us has changed. Technology has changed. The delivery of services, the way we communicate with each other have changed. The fact that we have laptops in this chamber... In 1996, when I first arrived here, they didn't exist. The fact that most of us have BlackBerrys attached to our hips most of the day — that didn't exist.

It allows us to communicate in a different way. But it's not just that. It also means that in the medical world, in the health care profession, new innovations are happening, and new medical devices are being developed. We have to be ready to ask ourselves: is that what we want for our citizens? I would venture a guess that they do want that. They don't want us to stay with the status quo. They don't want us to continue the way it was in the '90s. But we cannot be complacent. We cannot be idle. If we stay in the same spot, we will be overtaken by everyone else.

As I indicated, in my role as a minister of local government, I do have the opportunity to meet with mayors and elected officials around the province. Most recently I have been going to a number of the newly elected's workshops that have taken place, and I have met many new councillors, many new mayors, and they are all excited about their terms. I certainly wish them well, and I will engage with them over the next number of years in as many ways as possible to help them achieve the best for their communities. After all, we are all serving the same mutual constituents.

I know that we live in a province where our communities are as diverse as our dramatic geography and our colourful history — whether it's our largest city of Vancouver or our rapidly growing Surrey; regional centres such as Kamloops or Cranbrook; even quieter neighbourhoods in Saanich and Oak Bay, which I represent; or even smaller areas such as Port Alice or Queen Charlotte, where I visited in December. I know that in each of these communities there are British Columbians who care deeply about their families, who care deeply about their communities. Our work, our job in government, is about helping them to equip their communities to achieve their aspirations while ensuring that our system of community governance supports the overall development of growth in the province.

There are 157 municipalities in this province, the 157th being the new village of Queen Charlotte, the one I mentioned that I visited in December. There are also 27 regional districts around this province. Together these locally elected governments provide good governance to our diverse communities. They represent a major part of British Columbia's public sector, with annual budgets that total \$6 billion and employ over 40,000 people. These local governments, these local communities, provide fire, policing, land use planning, recreation services, local roads, water, sewer and a range of other services to our communities. You will hear from time to time, as my colleague the member for Nanaimo-Parksville just mentioned, about the sewer project in Lantzville. This is what our local communities provide to our citizenry.

Our mandate in our ministry means that we have to use our legislative responsibility for community governance with targeted spending to programs that impact and affect their communities in a positive way. But we do have to understand how our community governance works. This means addressing matters of provincial interest in any number of local provincial interests, including those of health and education.

For example, during this past year we were able to target \$80 million of provincial government financial support to 87 community water projects. This \$80 million provided \$120 million worth of projects. Our provincial government provided two-thirds, with local governments coming up with a balance of the one-third. It means improved drinking water and wastewater management, and that means healthier residents and healthier communities.

[1110]

The B.C. community water improvement program. We were able to use that to bridge the Canada-B.C. infrastructure program and, hopefully, an upcoming provincial, federal and local partnership that we will work on with the new federal government in Ottawa. We recognized the need to continue the momentum of the previous infrastructure program, which is why we have developed this new B.C. community water improvement program. We recognized the need to be proactive and get on with helping communities improve the day-to-day quality of life for their citizens.

We were also able to achieve a first in this province when it comes to securing a federal-provincial-local government deal, and that is with the New Deal for Cities and Communities. We were the first province to do so. We were the first province to secure an innovative agreement with the federal government, whereby we will see \$635 million in federal gas tax being transferred back to British Columbia communities over the next five years, and I know the first instalment has already arrived. I know that local governments are already accessing those dollars.

This agreement means funds to improve environmental infrastructure and health. It means cleaner air, cleaner water, reduced greenhouse gas emissions. It means healthier British Columbians. As you know, another one of our goals is healthy British Columbians.

Over the last two years we have increased support to local governments through traffic fine revenue sharing. With an additional \$70 million in the municipal system, it means safer places to live, work and play and improves community safety and community policing.

We didn't stop there. When communities came to us and said that they were facing another crisis and needed the provincial government to provide a framework or tools to help, we were there. We provided — this ministry — \$2 million of the \$7 million to the UBCM municipalities last fall as seed money for community programs to fight the scourge of crystal meth.

I believe that everyone in this Legislature — all members — when they return to their communities and speak to their community leaders, are just as passionate as each and every one of us about ridding our

communities of the crystal meth problem. It is a scourge on our communities. It is a scourge on our families. It destroys lives. When the UBCM asked to see how they could partner with us, there was no question. We wanted to step up to the plate. I'm proud to say that a number of communities are already accessing those dollars, finding innovative ways to do that.

The other \$5 million of the \$7 million strategy will be for increasing treatment programs and public awareness, because at the end of the day, so much does depend on public awareness. When you go to your first forum on crystal meth and you hear people talk about it, you are amazed how many people don't realize the impact of that, how quickly a young person or even an older person can become addicted. It can take only one try, and then the whole family is affected by it. This ministry was happy to be able to be a part of that strategy. We are building on this support with new funding, as I say, to support the prevention and treatment programs at the community level.

We will continue to work to improve our system of community governance. We will continue to be innovators in the area of local government. We, as well as local governments, know the importance of looking at new ways of doing things, of rethinking the status quo so that we can maintain and improve our quality of life. Whether it is by shared borrowing through the Municipal Finance Authority, pooled insurance through the municipal insurance authority or the modern legislative framework provided by the Community Charter that was introduced three years ago, our system of local governments demonstrates many creative innovations.

It is still challenging work, but to date our local government partners have risen to the occasion with advice and wisdom so that we can all build on the strength of our communities and provide cost-effective services to our mutual citizens and so that we can all build strong, growing regional economies based on the unique strengths of each region.

[1115]

As I said, it is not time to rest on our laurels. It is not time to just accept that we have achieved and that we can let the future years unfold. We want to stay leaders. We must continue to move forward. We must continue to work with our local governments, which is another reason why I'm pleased to be able to support the work on the Premier's Task Force on Community Opportunities. It is tasked at looking at how community governance and regulatory reform and revenue-sharing can be used more effectively to provide services to citizens.

There is, after all, as I've said, only one taxpayer. Like people in households everywhere, government is always looking to find ways to get the best possible service for the best value, for the best price. The work on the local government side of things — they're all steps in the right direction. They're all steps that form part of our government's commitment to our health care system.

I do believe that we all share a fundamental belief, and at the heart of everything, even while the members

opposite may not want to say so, I know they do believe that we live in the best place on earth here in British Columbia. Our commitment to that vision is unshakable. Our commitment to that vision will continue. Part of that commitment is effective care for our families, for our children, for our parents and our grandparents. We want to leave a better province for our children and for future generations, as I've indicated earlier, and we have a chance to do that here in this Legislature.

Over the past five years we have reclaimed our confidence, our optimism and our belief that we are a can-do province, which is why we're recognized as leaders. Again, when I heard the reading of the throne speech, it was a renewal of that commitment. With forethought and the ability to change and encounter changes in our society and in the world, we really can accomplish much, and the throne speech speaks to that.

The throne speech addresses the transformational force of our aging population. It is still hard to believe that one in seven is currently age 65 and over — what we have defined as seniors. But by the year 2030, 24 or 25 years from now, one in four will be in that category.

As I met with seniors, I've said this to them: "My mother is currently a senior." I know some of us, our parents who are still alive who are seniors.... I don't know everyone's age category. I'm not going to ask. But if any of us are in our 40s or 45 or 50, in 20 years we will be seniors. I see some smiles over there, so I guess I've touched on a few mid-40s across the chamber.

I know you're going to want your mother or father to be alive, just as I want my mother to be around still. You will be a senior at the same time your parent will be a senior, and your needs are going to be different. So how are we going to meet the challenges of two groups of seniors, those in their 60s and those in their 90s?

What I heard from Mr. Baxter, I believe, who is with the Urban Futures, is that one in three seniors will in fact reach their 90th birthday. That, too, was I wouldn't say a shock to me but an amazing statistic. One in three will reach their 90th. I do believe that, because when members opposite, as I do, send out congratulatory letters of anniversaries and birthdays, they must see that they are signing more and more letters of congratulations for birthdays at 90, 95, 100, 102.

I say 102 because recently I was in an inaugural council chamber with a constituent who was there watching the mayor give his inaugural speech. This was in December, just two months ago, and there was in the front row a senior citizen, 102, who still lives at home and is able to get around, sometimes with a little bit of help from her family. She was there, alert, listening to the inaugural speech of the mayor.

I am seeing more and more seniors — certainly, in my community of Oak Bay-Gordon Head — in that same healthy, vibrant lifestyle capacity. I have to reiterate the need for change, the need for long-term perspective, because we are going to have to accommodate, perhaps, two levels of seniors that we have never, ever had to deal with in the past.

[1120]

We know, too, that as we all get older the demand for health care will grow. It means we have to rethink what it means to be a senior, how our seniors live and where they live. We need to look at the changing profile of the health care system as our aging population increases.

Of course, as the Minister Responsible for Seniors' Issues, I was particularly happy to hear in the throne speech that — and I welcome it — the work of the Pacific Alzheimer Research Foundation was mentioned. Their goal of establishing a national research collaborative to find a cure for dementia is not only timely but significant.

By changing our attitudes toward dementia — looking for a cure rather than complacently accepting its occurrence — we can improve the quality of life for our seniors to reduce health care costs. I know that each and every one of us will at some point during this legislative session, or even in the next, talk about the seniors in our communities — as we should. We will all have to face some of their challenges. While dementia is not limited to seniors, it certainly has statistically been more representative of those who are older.

Last year, last October, we established the Premier's council on aging and seniors issues, and this is chaired by Dr. Patricia Baird, one of North America's leading authorities on health and public policy. The council is examining how to support seniors' independence and health and, just as importantly, their ability to continue as contributing members of society. The council has been working hard. They have been looking forward to putting together their final report, and they are going to have recommendations available that are due out no later than November 30 of this year.

I've already heard some of the concerns of seniors. They do want more housing options. They do want to live independently for as long as possible. They want expanded choices. They want appropriate care for seniors through a program such as Independent Living B.C. So we know that we're on the right track as we engage them. Over the last two years as well, through UBCM, communities have been able to access another fund which we helped establish, and that was to provide communities with an opportunity to understand seniors' housing needs. We provided \$2 million to UBCM to allow local governments to invest in that.

I see that the green light is on, and I thought I still had 15 more minutes. I only have another minute and a half. I can't believe how fast time goes when there is so much to say, so let me just conclude with a few remarks. I very much am supporting this throne speech, and I ask the members opposite to consider supporting it as well. I know it will break with tradition, but I think it is important they do because it means they will support vision.

They keep talking about having a plan. Well, I'm sorry to say that their plan is one of status quo. Their plan is to stand still. Their plan is to go back to the '90s. Their plan is to make sure that we don't have the nursing spaces, that we don't have more doctors being

trained, that we don't have enough supports that we're going to provide. That is not the plan. If it is, it is a confused plan.

Ours is one which is long-term. Ours is one that is visionary. Ours is one that we can all be proud of so that when we leave this place, whether it's 2009 or af-ter, we can be proud of what we left behind — that we can leave a province better than what we inherited; that our future generations will not be upset with the decisions we made; that they will, in fact, have hope; that they will feel confident as they move forward.

Hon. Speaker, it has been my pleasure to be able to speak on this throne speech. I know others are anxiously awaiting to rise to speak.

[1125]