



GOVERNMENT OF JAMAICA

RECOVERY

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**PRIME MINISTER
OF JAMAICA**

The Most Hon.
ANDREW HOLNESS
ON, MP.



**BUDGET
DEBATE 2022**

THURSDAY **MARCH 18** 2PM
GORDON HOUSE



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	4
INTRODUCTION	6
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC	8
CRIME, VIOLENCE AND SECURITY – JAMAICA CONSTABULARY FORCE	18
EDUCATION	22
INVESTING IN OUR INFRASTRUCTURE	24
Port Authority of Jamaica	24
Urban Development Corporation	29
National Road Operating and Construction Company	31
National Works Agency	35
The Jamaica Special Economic Zone Authority	38
The Development Bank of Jamaica	38
National Land Agency	40
National Environment and Planning Agency	41
National Water Commission	43
Housing	45
CONCLUSION	48

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Madam Speaker, Members of this Honourable House, Jamaicans and friends joining us locally and overseas, as I rise to address the Nation in these Budget Debates for a 6th time as Prime Minister, we give God thanks for sparing our lives through the unprecedented travails of 2020 to see this day.

Madam Speaker, this is your second time occupying the Speaker's chair. You have been even handed and judicious in the management of the proceedings of the House. Our Acting Clerk, Ms. Valrie Curtis is deserving of acknowledgement, giving excellent service to the House for 26 years. Parliament is attracting more viewership than ever before. How we conduct ourselves in language and mannerisms is under increasing scrutiny. Like it or not we are role models for the youth who are watching. We must not descend to the lowest level to make our representations; we can be strident without being obstreperous. The people look to their representatives for elevation, upliftment, and dignity. **Madam Speaker**, I know you will see to the maintenance of decorum in the House.

Madam Speaker, in the last election the people expressed confidence in the Administration and significantly increased the numbers on the government benches. We are also seeing more women being elected to Parliament than ever before, among them my wife, Juliet, who is entering her second term, so I can tell you with authority, that women MPs demonstrate a high level of compassion, patience, commitment and importantly, organization. The Jamaica Labour Party made a concerted effort to recruit and position female candidates in seats and it is clear that the public approved.

Madam Speaker, we all agree that Parliament needs to exercise greater oversight of Government policy, however it is an incomplete view of Parliamentary Democracy which suggests it is only the Opposition by leading sessional committees, that keeps the Executive in check. The Backbench has an important role to play in leading the charge for oversight, particularly on the achievement of policy goals and targets in public bodies and agencies.

To this end, I have arranged training for the government caucus of new Members of Parliament in parliamentary governance, to be clear this is not being done with government resources and separate from the training routinely done for Parliamentarians.

It is evident **Madam Speaker**, that with 16 sessional committees and several ad hoc committees this building does not have the facility to properly accommodate a fully functioning Parliamentary committee system. Neither does the Parliament have the administrative capacity to support multiple committee meetings simultaneously. Nevertheless, the business of the Nation cannot be stalled, committees that are empanelled under the standing orders must start working on their

subject matter and review materials, even if they don't have hearings. By the end of June, I am mandating that all sessional committees must have at least one meeting, whether in person or virtually, given the COVID protocols.

I have also tasked the Leader of Government Business to immediately and expeditiously undertake a comprehensive review of the system of sessional committees and make recommendations as to the resources needed to improve their effective functioning in the short term.



Madam Speaker, I am pleased to report that detailed designs and drawings for the new Parliament are complete and building approvals have been granted by the various authorities. The project is now going through the public investment process, after which, we expect to enter the procurement phase after which construction is projected to start early in the 2022/23 Financial Year.

Madam Speaker, as we assemble as a Parliament, we reflect on the hardship and sacrifice of the people during this pandemic.

We acknowledge those who put their lives at risk every day to serve us; our health care workers who work tirelessly on the frontline, caring for us in the hospitals, manning quarantine areas, screening passengers at airports, testing, conducting surveillance and contact tracing in communities, and now administering vaccines nationally. Today, on behalf of all Jamaica, I say thank you.

It is appropriate to acknowledge the Jamaican Diaspora, many of whom are watching online from all over the world. Amid the lockdowns and job losses which undoubtedly affected them as well, they continued to support their family and loved ones back home, oftentimes increasing the amount and frequency of their remittances.

Madam Speaker, I want to acknowledge the work and partnership of the Jamaican private sector during the pandemic. Corporate entities have forgone the benefit of the removal of the Asset Taxes, some have put in place various deferral and relief programmes for customers, others have made significant cash-and-kind contributions to various efforts.

They have given of their time and effort, working side by side with government officials on numerous ad hoc and established committees, such as the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Taskforce, developing and deploying various solutions and policy initiatives. However, we must never forget the hundreds of regular businesses, large and small, who have kept their staff on payroll even as economic activity fell. This has kept thousands of households going during this difficult time.

Madam Speaker, I wish to thank the hundreds of thousands of members of the church community and the leadership of the Church who have been very understanding of the necessity of the measures that have affected how they worship. Most established churches have exhibited a high level of compliance; undoubtedly, there have been some, smaller congregations and independent clergy who have, at times, disregarded the protocols, however, in general the churches, and in particular the established leadership bodies, have been very willing partners in managing one area of Jamaican life that accounts for significant gathering.

INTRODUCTION

Madam Speaker, the Jamaican people have been, understanding, enduring and resilient during these difficult and unprecedented times. A favourite communication strategy of politicians during these debates, is to highlight the personal everyday struggles of an individual and use it as a metaphorical anecdote of the broader hardship and suffering of the people. The struggle of the people who have lost their livelihoods or had to close their business, personified in Yvonne, the household worker who lost some of her days' work and her children unable to connect to online school platforms because they are without devices, in Anthony, the farmer in St. Ann, or the vendor who, prior to COVID, made a living selling bag juice at a school which is now closed. These representative stories, must be told, and debated in this forum. Indeed, we must never forget the poor and marginalised. People must be at the centre of policymaking. It is important that our constituents understand that we are aware, and we understand the struggles they face, which are now made worse by the pandemic.

However, politicians should do more than just playing politics with poverty. Parliament must do more than just talking about the struggles of the poor. Governments should not add to the burdens and struggles of the people because of bad policy and maladministration. For decades, the struggling people of Jamaica tuned in to these Budget Debates with great trepidation and fear that a new set of taxes will be added on to their basket of burdens.

Madam Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to say that this administration has not added to the tax burden of the people. For Jamaica, it is no ordinary achievement, given the high debt profile of our public finances and significant impact of the Pandemic on our economy, that we can deliver a Budget in the midst of crisis and say, “No New Taxes”. More than “No New Taxes” is the fact that we have been able to “give back taxes” to the people making their burdens lighter.

We have instituted the largest emergency social support programme in the history of Jamaica, the **We CARE** programme, which last year gave over JA\$10b of direct cash support in a structured and accountable way to persons who lost income and livelihoods or were otherwise economically vulnerable. And in this Budget, we have continued the **We CARE** programme with JA\$8.1b in various targeted cash ‘give-backs’ and support modalities. This is within the larger JA\$60b Social and Economic Recovery and Vaccine for Jamaica Programme (SERVE) which is designed to support Jamaica’s **faster, stronger and better recovery** from the Pandemic. Through good policy and better management of public finances, we have been able to give back to the people, lightening their burdens, allowing them to keep more of their pay by increasing the income tax threshold to \$1.5m, reducing the transfer tax, removing the asset tax, and we should not forget that last year we returned JA\$14b to the people by reducing GCT by 1.5%. For the first time in a long time, Anthony the farmer, and Yvonne the days’ worker did not have to worry that their Government would cost them more and increase their burden.

As bad as things have been during the Pandemic, Miss Dorothy the retired midwife, Marlon the taximan, and Valarie the room attendant at the hotel, knows that we are right there with them in the struggle, making the burden lighter, not just talking about our professed love for the poor but demonstrating meaningful care and tangible solidarity with the hard-working people of this country who fight the good struggle every day to achieve their prosperity.

Madam Speaker, the narrative of those who would seek to use poverty for political gain, asserts that nothing is happening in Jamaica and no progress is being made in the perpetual struggle of the masses for economic freedom and development. This is not the case, the last Survey of Living Conditions 2018 recorded a poverty rate of 12.6 per cent, a decline of 6.7 percentage points and the lowest rate in poverty since 2008. Today, as presented in the Budget, every Jamaican is reaping the dividend of the sacrifices made since 2009 and the commitment to fiscal discipline and strong public administration. Jamaica today is in a far better place than we were 10 years ago.

And while we must admit that on the individual level the feeling of progress may not be evenly experienced, and this is part of the perpetual struggle for personal prosperity, on the national level, Jamaica is in a far better position to assist the poor and vulnerable in our society, not only with cash transfers, but with real social investments in their education, health, housing and security. Something good is happening in Jamaica.

Madam Speaker, the narrative of the politics of poverty does not highlight the enterprise, industry, and creativity of the people in the struggle for their prosperity. It strips the people of their agency, their right, independence, responsibility, and desire to find solutions to their problems and overcome in the struggle of life. It portrays our people as helpless, hopeless, and hapless just waiting on Government or some foreign entity to hand out a solution.

While we accept that dependency and victimhood is still a part of our culture, most Jamaicans are not waiting on Government to find solutions to their problems, they are finding ways to adapt and bridge gaps; like Keron King, Principal of the Little Bay Primary and Infant School in Westmoreland who ensured that his students in remote areas had access to lessons by personally delivering and collecting, sometimes on the back of a motorcycle, specially printed worksheets. Taneka Mckoy Phipps, a teacher at Union Gardens Primary in Kingston, was concerned for children running about the community unsupervised when her school was closed. She took it upon herself to create notice boards in the surrounding communities on which she, assisted by her daughters, wrote down daily lessons for children or parents to copy and use. She also mobilized parents to give them support and training on how to teach and stimulate their young children.

Principal King and Teacher Phipps did not only complain about the digital divide or allow the absence of internet access to prevent their children from learning.

They took responsibility, exercised agency, and independently developed and executed solutions. Hundreds of thousands of Jamaicans are doing that every day in their own little way. The story of our struggle is not only about hardship and failure, but also about our determination, instrumentality, and victories. These stories must also be told for the completeness of the narrative of Jamaican life.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Madam Speaker, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profoundly negative impact on our country. We have lost 511 lives. Every life lost is one too many. I offer my deep condolences to all those who have lost a family member, a friend, or a colleague.

The pandemic and the measures designed to tackle it have had dramatic effects on economic activity. PIOJ projections are that the economy contracted by approximately 10.2% for the

calendar year 2020 and 12% for fiscal year ending March 31, 2021. This is the largest annual decline on record and was the first annual contraction since 2012.

The economic decline in 2020/21 was driven by a massive 70% contraction in our tourist industry. The pandemic has decimated our foreign exchange inflows from tourism which are projected to fall by 74% or US\$2.5 billion in 2020/21. Again, this level of fallout is unprecedented in our history¹.



The economic decline has resulted in massive fallout in Government revenues to the tune of \$70 billion or 12% as compared with the previous fiscal year. At the same time, expenditures increased. Approximately \$40 billion was spent by central government on the CARE Programme, health expenditure, support of Public Bodies affected by the pandemic and incremental compensation expenditure, particularly in health and security. This \$40 billion does not include the expenditures on programmes implemented by the National Housing Trust and other public bodies to help cushion the impact of the pandemic.²

Madam Speaker, in relation to the CARE programme, the speed of the response is worth noting, literally 14 days after Jamaica had our first case of COVID-19 this programme was announced.

¹This fall-out is larger than the oil price shock of the 70s, the Bauxite revenue fallout of the 80s, the Finasc Meltdown of the 90s, and the Global recession of 2009.

²It is important to note that even in this massive fallout where self-financing public bodies have seen steep fall off in revenues, no public sector work has been furloughed or lost their job.

It is also noteworthy that the programme was administered with the highest degree of transparency and probity. Every Jamaican that met the criteria had equal access to the benefits irrespective of race, class, gender, or political affiliation.

Madam Speaker, the programme also clearly demonstrated the benefits of digitisation. The application process was entirely online, over 400,000 Jamaicans applied from their mobile phone, tablet or computer.

Madam Speaker, no previous administration in Jamaica has ever faced a health and economic crisis of this magnitude and at the same time³. These crises, have tested our mettle as a government and as a people. But we have shown courage, dexterity in management and incredible resilience of which we can justly be proud as a country. I am confident that we will recover, faster, stronger and better.

Madam Speaker, despite the pandemic:

- The construction sector has grown. While the sector was hit hard during April to June 2020 and declined by 14.5%, it grew by 7% in the July to September 2020 quarter, and is forecasted by PIOJ to grow by 6.2% in the October to December 2020 quarter.
- More new companies and more new businesses were registered in 2020/21 than ever before in our history.
- The unemployment rate (which had moved from a low of 7.2% in October 2019 to 12.7% in July 2020) has already started to decline to 10.7% at October 2020. Still very high, **Madam Speaker**, but trending in the right direction.
- Remittance inflows grew by US\$600 million, a 23% increase over the previous year.⁴
- Our current account deficit is estimated to be flat at 1.7% of GDP 2020/21, vs 1.6% of GDP in 2019/20.

Even though we lost US\$2.5 in foreign exchange earnings from our ‘tourism export’ there was only a marginal increase in the difference between our total inflows from exports and other earnings and what we spend on imports and other outflows. This shows an economy that is developing the ability to absorb shocks.⁵

- Our net international reserves have been maintained at a robust level of over US\$3 billion.
- The amount of public debt has remained flat over the year despite the massive fallout in Government revenue and increase in Government expenditure. **Madam Speaker**, Jamaica is among only a few countries that have been able to achieve this. Governments globally issued a record US\$16.3 trillion in debt in 2020 and are expected to borrow another US\$12.6 trillion this year.

³Last year this administration has had to deal with a health Pandemic, a violence epidemic, major weather events, and a massive economic fall-out. No other administration has had these challenges and has dealt with all of them so effectively.

⁴Again let me thank the Jamaican Diaspora for their unwavering commitment to their homeland.

⁵In simple terms, the current account deficit is the value of the goods and services we import compared to the value of the goods and services we export. It includes interest and dividends, and transfers, such as foreign aid

- The highest credit ratings that Jamaica has had in 20 years from Standard & Poor's and in 14 years from Fitch have thus far been maintained while many other countries have suffered downgrades.

Madam Speaker, maintaining our macroeconomic stability and debt sustainability in the face of the most severe health and economic crisis the world has seen in nearly a hundred years did not happen by chance. We were able to do this because of buffers that we had built up from prudent fiscal management over a number of years. We opened the 2020/21 fiscal year with cash reserves of approximately \$90 billion. When the COVID-19 pandemic came we were able to finance a 3.5% fiscal deficit with nominal debt virtually flat.

EXCHANGE RATE DEPRECIATION BY ADMINISTRATION 1972 - 2021

Period	Party	Years	Exchange rate at start (J\$ to US\$1)	Exchange rate at end (J\$ to US\$1)	Percentage devaluation	Annual percentage devaluation
February 1972 - October 1980	PNP	8.7	0.77	1.78	131.2%	10.1%
October 1980 - February 1989	JLP	8.3	1.78	5.51	209.6%	14.5%
February 1989 - September 2007	PNP	18.5	5.51	70.41	1177.9%	14.8%
September 2007 - December 2011	JLP	5.3	70.41	86.60	23.0%	4.0%
December 2011 - February 2016	PNP	4.2	86.60	121.85	40.7%	8.5%
February 2016 - March 17, 2021	JLP	5.0	121.85	146.69	20.4%	3.8%

Source: Official exchange rates from boj.org.jm

Madam Speaker, as there has been quite a lot of misinformation in the public domain regarding devaluation of the currency, let us examine the exchange rate data going back to the year of my birth, 1972, across different political administrations. The analysis shows that the annual percentage devaluation over the last five years is 3.8%. Over the term of the previous administration, it was more than two times higher at 8.5%. Over the past five years of this administration, the rate of devaluation is the lowest of any administration since 1972. And this was achieved in the face of the worst economic crisis in our history during which our foreign exchange inflows from tourism declined by US\$2.5 billion. **Madam Speaker**, the Leader of the Opposition stated that the profits of the Bank of Jamaica which will be paid as a dividend of \$33 billion to the Consolidated Fund arose mainly as a result of the devaluation of the currency.

Madam Speaker, there was a 40.7% devaluation of the currency under the previous administration. Between 1989 and 2007, the Jamaican dollar went from J\$5.51 to J\$70.41 to US\$1, a 1,178% devaluation, representing an average devaluation rate of nearly 15% every year. This means that the Bank of Jamaica would have had even greater foreign exchange gains during that time. What happened to all those gains? Where were the dividends from the Bank of Jamaica? Good policy matters, **Madam Speaker**.

Madam Speaker, I have heard the calls from the Opposition for the Government to spend a further JA\$21.3b, calls from other quarters are for the Government to spend an additional JA\$40b on various social support programmes. If we had the revenues and our debt-to-GDP ratio was low, of course we would go deeper in counter cyclical spending to stimulate the economy and give further cushion to the vulnerable. To be clear, we have suspended our fiscal targets and adjusted our primary surplus to allow for the expenditure the of JA\$60b under the Social and Economic Recovery and Vaccine for Jamaica Programme (SERVE). This is the maximum we can do without throwing us back into a debt trap, especially when our debt was already too high to begin with. What is being proposed by the Opposition is that we borrow more in order to pay interest costs.

Madam Speaker, this is precisely how a vicious debt spiral begins leading to an increase in our debt again to unsustainable levels, undermining the credibility of government's fiscal policy, putting our international credit ratings at risk and ultimately threatening the prospects of recovery that every Jamaican household is anticipating. We can return to growth without unsustainably increasing borrowing. We must get our people vaccinated so we can rapidly return our economy to full operation.

Madam Speaker, let me now turn to the management of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Managing the pandemic is like walking a tight rope, it requires balance, through flexibility, focus and timing. To achieve this balanced outcome, my government established consistent principles that we would follow in making decisions regarding the mix of measures that would be employed at any time, these are:

1. Being **evidence-based**, meaning the Government would not take knee-jerk actions or act out of political expediency, its response must be rooted in evidence and science.
2. Being **situationally appropriate**, meaning we would not rely solely on generalized measures but we would also tailor measures to fit circumstances, for example, if we found evidence that some schools by virtue of their special circumstance could be reopened with low risk, then we would tailor measures around these circumstances to allow their reopening.,
3. Being **proportionate**, meaning that the extent and restrictiveness of the measures imposed would be no more than sufficient to control the potential threat and prevent risks from materializing.

Between March and August 2020, we managed to keep our daily confirmed cases well below 100 and closer to 50, thereby flattening the curve and keeping well within the capacity of the public health system to respond. We acted early and extensively.

Recall that we closed borders, implemented tight curfews, as tight as 3pm on holidays, all schools were closed, bars and places of amusements were closed, we asked churches to worship online, some communities, and an entire parish were placed under strict quarantine for periods, and restaurants were restricted to take-out only. This came at great economic cost and was not practical or sustainable. In May 2020, the Cabinet took a decision to reopen our economy using a risk-based approach, balancing the risks to lives and the risks livelihoods as I outline earlier. We meticulously went about crafting measures that we based on data and scientific advice, tailored to situations, and sufficient to mitigate risks. This allowed us to reopen churches in May 2020, followed by community bars, restaurants, horse-racing, and gaming. These 're-openings' were supported by progressively reducing curfew hours from 6 pm through 6 am to 11 pm through 5 am. We opened our borders on June 1, 2020 to allow for controlled re-entry of nationals and residents. On June 15, 2020 we opened our borders to international travellers under a programme of controlled entry which involved, testing, screening, quarantine, and registration on the Jamcovid and Visit Jamaica Websites.

This was further supported by the creation of the Resilient Corridor. In 10 months since the Controlled Entry programme has been in place, 525,727 persons have arrived in Jamaica, 117,569 are residents and 408,727 are visitors including business travellers and tourists. Had we not done this the fall out in tourism revenues would have been 100% instead of 75%, there would be no recovery in employment, our balance of payment deficit would have worsened, overall government revenues would have been threatened, and there would be no argument to be made about spending more.

Madam Speaker, the decision to gradually reopen the economy meant that in tandem we would increase the capacity of the health system to cope with increasing numbers. From Figure 1, it can be seen that in March 2020 before the first case, we started with an initial bed capacity of 15, and increased that rapidly to 150 beds. We continued to gradually increase capacity until September 2020 when our Covid reserved beds went up to approximately 350.

In March 2021, we again almost doubled capacity to now having 600 beds designated to treat patients with COVID-19.

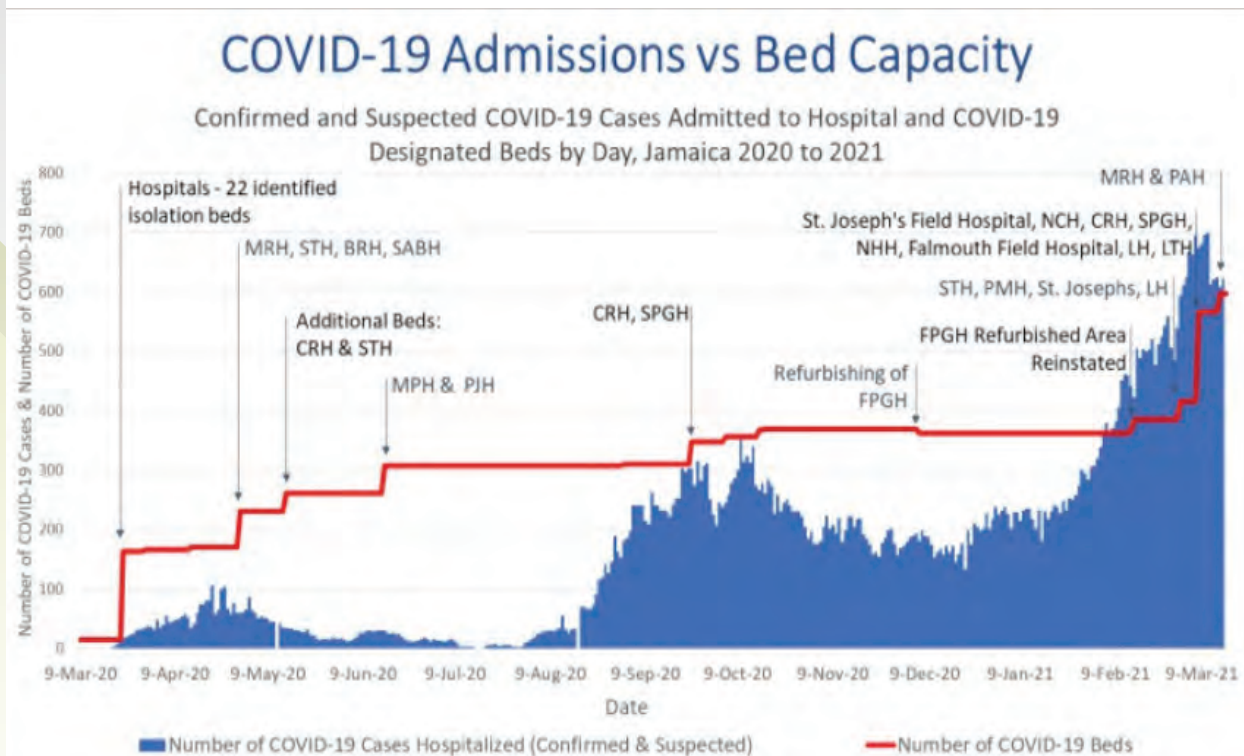


Figure 1

Madam Speaker, for almost a year, we kept our hospitalization curve below our bed capacity. Upon entering community spread phase in September 2020, the second wave of increased hospitalization which followed, came close to capacity but did not overwhelm the system.

We reinstated tighter measures which reduced infections and stabilized the number of hospitalizations to well below capacity. We managed to maintain this position through Christmas and up to the first week of February 2021. We are now experiencing a third wave of increasing infection spread which is much larger than before and more dangerous in terms of threat to life because of the associated hospitalization numbers. Hospitalization now exceeds the beds available by as much as 15% in some instances. This means that someone who needs to be taken in on a ward, may not have a bed readily available and may have to wait. This places great stress on our already overburdened doctors and nurses. It potentially could impact on the mortality rate. More persons could die!

Madam Speaker, the current set of measures expire on the 22nd of this month.

With hospitalization numbers continuing to exceed capacity, daily positivity rate in the 30% range, and our estimated infection reproductive rate continuing above 1, I will be announcing a new set of stronger measures designed to protect our health care system and save lives in the short-term, which eventually protects and preserves our economy and livelihoods in the long-term.

Madam Speaker, today the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development tabled

amendments to the Disaster Risk Management Act to implement the new ticketing system for enforcement of infection prevention and control measures. The Government is prepared to have the Bill reviewed by a Joint Select Committee over the weekend and debated and passed next week if the Opposition is willing to cooperate. This would make the new measures to be announced more effective.

Madam Speaker, not only did we increase bed capacity, we also invested in our testing and scientific analysis capacity during the Pandemic.

Last year the CHASE Fund financed high capacity testing equipment and supplies for the National Influenza Centre (NIC). This equipment significantly enhanced the country's capacity to test COVID-19 (and other viral) samples more quickly and accurately.

Viruses are constantly changing, leading to the emergence of new variants that may have different characteristics. Since late 2020, multiple variants of SARS-CoV-2 have been detected and some variants may be easier to transmit and cause more severe disease. Earlier this year, we sent several samples for testing in a regional facility to determine whether the UK variant is present in Jamaica. The results took an extended time to be delivered. Jamaica must have the instant capability to determine the variants of viruses present in our population as part of our routine public health surveillance. To this end, CHASE will fund the acquisition of a genome sequencer and the requisite accessories and reagents.



Madam Speaker, on March 8, 2021, we welcomed our first shipment of 50,000 doses of the Oxford/AstraZeneca Vaccine, donated by the Government of India. I want to express deep appreciation to the people and government of India for this extremely kind gesture and show of global solidarity. On March 15, 2021, Jamaica became the first country in the region to receive supplies of 14,400 doses of Oxford/AstraZeneca Vaccine from the COVAX facility. These vaccines are being administered across the island according to the established priority groups published by the Ministry of Health.

Madam Speaker, with only 64,400 doses of vaccine in hand, and a second dose required for full effectiveness, we must be very strategic and fair in how we distribute the vaccine. I am well aware of the history of the distribution of scarce public goods in Jamaica. I am extremely sensitive to the deeply embedded perception in the minds of our people that politicians and connected persons will get access to the limited vaccine before those who are truly in need.

I am also sensitive to the calls that national leaders should take the vaccine first as a sign of reassurance that they have confidence in the medicine they are asking you to take. Indeed, the Leader of the Opposition will confirm that I extended an invitation to him to receive the vaccine with me and other national leaders immediately as the vaccines were ready to be administered after arrival. Within hours of this arrangement, I received several calls including from leading health professionals objecting to the notion that young politicians should get vaccines before healthcare workers and the elderly.

Madam Speaker, I am 49 years old, I still consider myself a young politician. So I reflected on what was said to me directly, and the commentaries in media. I discussed it with the Ministry of Health and Wellness and we agreed that we would make it clear that the principle of equity in distribution must not be compromised.

Given that there is more than enough demand for the 64,400 doses of vaccines in hand presently, the important assurance and example that must be given now is that vaccines will be distributed equitably, orderly, and strategically to protect the health care system, reduce hospitalization and reduce deaths among the most vulnerable. Already over 16,000 persons healthcare workers, elderly, and security forces have been vaccinated.

With limited supply of vaccines, the first group to be inoculated should be our health care workers. Even in that set those 60 and over with comorbidities should be prioritized and then work down to the younger and healthier persons. Getting healthcare workers vaccinated first ensures that health system can continue to serve the population with less worry for personal exposure, and loss of capacity due to illness and death. After healthcare workers, the demographic that exhibits the highest vulnerability to the disease should be vaccinated. The global mortality rate for COVID-19 is around 2%.

In Jamaica the case fatality rate is 1.5%. However, 3.7% of those who contract the disease in the age group 60 – 69 have died and they account for 20.9% of all deaths. 7.3% of persons who contract the disease in the age group 70-79 have died and they account for 24.5% of all deaths. 12% of those who contract the disease in the age group 80 – 89 have died and they account for 19.6% of all deaths. Clearly, to reduce the risk of loss of life and hospitalization the population 60 years and over should be the priority focus after healthcare workers. For those who harbour fears of the vaccine, the case fatality statistics speaks for themselves, get vaccinated.

Madam Speaker, I intend to get vaccinated, but I will await my turn in the line. In keeping with the prioritization order set, some public officials including Ministers and MPs in the 60 and over age group, have been vaccinated. I will be taking my vaccination along with front-line public-sector workers, meaning those who serve and interface with the public directly, such as cashiers, bearers, receptionists, and field officers.

This group will come after the healthcare workers are complete, and the majority of the security forces are vaccinated, bearing in mind that the age group 60 and over is being vaccinated continuously and concurrently with all groups. This could happen as early as next week.

Madam Speaker, there is a global shortage of vaccine. Production capacity has not yet caught up with demand and the capacity that exists has been reserved by rich countries. We have commitments by virtue of our participation in the global COVAX facility and the African Medical Supplies Platform, however we are always mindful that the supply situation is dynamic and may change suddenly. Jamaica is also pursuing both bilateral and commercial options to acquire supplies. Orders that have been negotiated require lead time of several weeks to be delivered and the situation here is even more uncertain. However, we expect to continue receiving small but sufficient supplies to keep our vaccination programme active. The supply situation should begin to stabilize and have greater certainty in June as more vaccines are approved, and more production capacity is brought online.

Madam Speaker, this means that we still have a few more months ahead of us for the strict maintenance of protocols. It means we must be very careful with the supplies we have and use it where it matters most. It means that we all must exercise greater personal responsibility in wearing our mask, social distancing, and avoid unnecessary travel. It is not the end of the journey, but the end is in sight, and you can feel secure and confident that this Government will continue its wise and judicious management of your affairs, protecting both your life and livelihood.

Age Distribution of COVID-19 Deaths, Jamaica

Age Group (yrs.)	Number of Deaths	% of Deaths	Case Fatality Rate (%)
<10	1	0.2	0.1
10-19	4	0.8	0.2
20-29	5	1.0	0.1
30-39	20	3.9	0.3
40-49	40	7.8	0.8
50-59	71	13.9	1.6
60-69	107	20.9	3.7
70-79	125	24.5	7.3
80-89	100	19.6	12.0
>=90	38	7.9	16.9
Total	511	100.0	1.5

Data as at March 17, 2020 (number of deaths 511, number of COVID-19 Cases 33,366)

CRIME, VIOLENCE AND SECURITY

Madam Speaker, our security forces have been called on to play a major supporting role in the management of the Pandemic. Increasingly our police and military is being called upon to deal with unconventional threats and give support in non-traditional areas. Some have lost their lives in the course of duty.

A fair assessment will conclude that they have performed their roles creditably, they have been committed and acted with restraint and I wish to express our appreciation for their service.

Peace Building through SOEs and ZOSOs

Madam Speaker, the most pressing matter of concern for most Jamaicans regarding our sense of security is the murder rate and its seemingly intractable nature. We can report that we ended 2020 with less murders than the previous year. And since 2018 we have essentially flattened the murder curve.

There is no doubt that our use of States of Public Emergency have worked to reduce murders and shootings where ever they have been deployed. I remain proud of the fact that this administration was able to develop and implement a framework to enable our security forces to use extraordinary powers and enhanced measures without doing violence to any citizen or resulting in the death of any citizen. Of greater importance is that the public views the SOEs as effective in improving their safety and security.



Madam Speaker, there are legal questions raised about the use of the SOEs and it is the intention of the government to have those issues resolved. The Opposition and other commentators proffer the view that the Government is using the SOEs as a crime fighting tool.

I wish to draw an important distinction that I hope will bring greater clarity to Government's approach to national security and the use of the SOEs.

Madam Speaker the levels of violent crimes, in particular shootings and resultant murders are well above the norm for countries at peace where conventional policing and law enforcement measures can be applied. There is a point where the sheer volume of murders and the gruesomeness of the incidents not only repulse and drive fear into the public, but also overwhelm the security forces and the justice systems. What we really have are communities at war with each other, captured by gangs that operate like militia and led by dons who behave like warlords. When a country gets to this point, the problem is more than a crime problem and the solution requires more than conventional policing. What is required is an intervention to restore and keep the peace. The Zones of Special Operations and its short-term version, the States of Public Emergency, were designed and deployed along the lines of classic peace keeping missions.

The objective was to disarm and dominate the space, control movement in and out, keep gang members out, facilitate community life and social intervention, maintain peace and win the trust and respect of the citizens. The residents of the communities that have benefitted from either

the SOE or the ZOZO will tell you that it brought peace to their community and gave them assurance of security. When the Leader of the Opposition opposes the SOEs, he is opposing an effective tool that has brought peace to communities in a structured way.

Madam Speaker, we now have four communities under Zones of Special Operations. This year we are planning to add an additional two communities, and restructure the operation of one existing ZOSO. The Jamaica Social Investment Fund is charged with managing the social transformation of these communities and plans are already in places. This means two less communities at war and a lessening of the murder rate.

Dismantling gangs through effective investigations

Madam Speaker, while the SOEs attenuated areas in conflict, the police were busy doing police work. In Jamaica homicides are significantly biased towards persons affiliated with gangs or gangsters (approximately 80%).

The anti-gang strategy, apart from the disruptive operational activities designed to reduce their freedom of movement and action, relies heavily on the use of the Criminal Justice (Suppression of Criminal Organisations) Act - commonly known as the anti-gang legislation, to investigate and prosecute the gang as a collective whole. Over the last three years, 167 gangsters have been arrested and 130 placed before the Courts. This has disrupted the activities of ten (10) of the major violent gangs across the island. Fifty-three (53) members of the Clansman Gang are currently in custody awaiting trial. In September 2020, the Strategic Counter Gang Taskforce – a multi formation partnership between the Counter Terrorism & Organized Crime Branch, Specialised Operations and the Financial Investigations Division was established to further enhance the Constabulary's counter gang efforts.

In October 2020, we obtained our first conviction of a criminal gang. The police will continue to do the meticulous investigative work necessary to dismantle all the gangs in Jamaica.

Tackling Violence

Madam Speaker, while the police enforce their anti-gang strategy targeting gangs who perpetrate the highest levels of violence in our society, we cannot ignore the remaining attributions for murder in the country – the 20% of men, women and children, some of whom are murdered at the hands of those known to them (their very own relatives in some instances) in a spate of domestic and interpersonal related murders. We are seeing an increasing trend of inter familial disputes and contract killings over land, inheritance, and simple disagreements over things such as food or animals taking garbage onto neighbours' properties.

Madam Speaker, in recognition of the importance of violence prevention in the reduction of crime and violence, I established a National Commission on Violence Prevention to study the problem of violence in Jamaica and the existing strategies being used to reduce violence, and to make



realistic and attainable recommendations to specifically target attitudinal and behavioural changes in the society.

The Commission will formulate and recommend to the Government, a ten-year plan using a public health approach to address the cultural norm of resorting to violence as a means of conflict resolution. The Commission has already begun its work and has presented its Strategic Plan for my approval. The government recognizes that the violence problem is not solely a police problem. All of society must understand that we have become too accepting of violence as a means of resolving conflict, in our music and entertainment, in our intimate partner relations, in the correction of our children, in domestic matters, in almost all aspects of our interpersonal transactions.

Violence is of epidemic proportions in Jamaica, and this administration recognizes it for what it is and is taking a structured approach to address it.

Use of Forensics

Irrespective of the perpetrator of the crime, key to improved investigative outcomes is an emphasis on the use of integrated scientific approaches in solving crimes.

The strategy requires a shift from investigations and case file preparations being reliant on witness statements, to a process utilizing more science-based evidence in investigations and case building. The growing number of ballistic reports generated, and the linkages identified between

crime scenes have progressed several major investigations in the Courts. The linkages have aided in the identification of inter and intra gang activity, criminal suspects and has also provided invaluable intelligence that has initiated several investigations. Additionally, cyber forensics and DNA evidence have played a critical role in the clear up of cases.

Increases in our cyber forensics processing output and the routine retrieval of DNA from crime scenes and recovered weapons have directly led to more convictions. This approach to investigations has resulted in better clear up rates. In 2020, the JCF recorded a 53% clear up rate for homicides, compared to 39% in 2019.

Improving working conditions of the JCF

Madam Speaker, improving the working environment of the police is critical to raising morale. I am proud to say that this administration has invested more in the building and renovation of police facilities than any other before now, with over 116 police facilities programmed over the last 3 years.

The JCF has also benefitted from significant investment in building a more standardised, fit-for-purpose and newer transportation fleet in order to improve the response times to calls for service and provide greater police efficiency through the use of integrated database, fleet management and tracking systems.

I am also pleased to report that the Body Worn Camera System is now being rolled out. This will provide protection for members of the JCF and the public through the provision of an objective view of incidents and have a positive impact on the speed at which incidents are investigated and disposed of.

Madam Speaker, this administration has taken a carefully studied and strategic approach to security and crime reduction. Our strategy is multidimensional, practical and citizen focused. Through our steady and deliberate efforts we have been seeing results and I am confident that we will overcome the crime monster in Jamaica.

EDUCATION

Madam Speaker, I believe the sector that has been hardest hit by the pandemic is education, I fear it will have the most far-reaching, long lasting and devastating effect on our society and prospect for faster, stronger and better recovery. In an already uneven and unequal system, the pandemic would have widened the education divide in our society. I have asked the Minister of Education to do a comprehensive study on learning loss in the system and make recommendations to Cabinet by June 15, 2020 on this could be corrected.

Madam Speaker, we must get our children back to school by September 2021. I have insisted that teachers should be in the first phase of those being prioritized for vaccination. Depending on how quickly we can get our teachers vaccinated we could possibly consider summer school as an option for make-up classes.



Madam Speaker, I fear that our early childhood learners would be hardest, as they are at the age where they are most receptive to learning and foundational skills are developed. In the distribution of tablets as well early childhood age students are likely to be overlooked to this end the CHASE fund will provide \$50M through a partnership with the National Education Trust (NET), toward the procurement and distribution of tablets to over 2,000 students in infant schools island wide.

Madam Speaker, the Jamaica Education Transformation Commission which was established in July 2020 has met with a wide range of stakeholders and international partners as well as specialists in educational development, including several who led previous reform initiatives resulting from the 2004 Task Force Report.

In its work, the Commission is especially alert to the complexities emerging from the COVID 19 pandemic and seeks to take advantage of the innovations it has forced upon our educators, in order to build back better when normalcy returns.

The First Draft of the findings and proposed recommendations within the first quarter of 2021/2022.

In order to remain relevant and compete in the 21st century global economy, we have to fundamentally transform ourselves. STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and Coding are at the heart of the global technological revolution. **Madam Speaker**, I had announced last year that this administration is committed to the development of six (6) new Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) focused high schools that will prepare students for careers in STEM fields. This is not to the exclusion of investment in culture as we will also develop a high school focused on the performing arts.

Madam Speaker, our plans were delayed because of the pandemic. We have identified locations, and this year we will move forward with detailed designs and implementation plans for two of the six STEM focused high schools.

INVESTING IN OUR INFRASTRUCTURE

Madam Speaker, infrastructure investment stimulates the economy but we must do so strategically and purposefully. This is not merely about projects and assets; It is about building physical structures that will enhance lives.

Port Authority of Jamaica

Madam Speaker, the 2020/2021 financial year has been a very difficult one for the Port Authority of Jamaica (PAJ) in which the Authority will post its first loss in eight years. While the pandemic dealt a huge blow to global tourism, perhaps no other sector in the industry has been impacted



more severely than the cruise industry. As a result, our Cruise Shipping segment which accounted for \$2.92B or 30% of the Authority's total revenues in the 2020/2021 was completely eliminated.

On a positive note, however, revenues from cargo operations exceeded the budget during the fiscal year. Measures to reduce operating expenses also yielded savings against budget. These effects were however, insufficient to overcome losses from fallout in Cruise business.

With the vaccination programme in full swing in the United States, the PAJ is cautiously optimistic that Cruise operations will resume on or before the start of the season in November 2021. In anticipation of the sustained positive impact of Cruise Shipping on job creation and growth in the periods ahead, the Authority proceeded with expansion and upgrade projects at the major Cruise Terminals.

Montego Freeport Terminal

Madam Speaker, Expansion in the Freeport Terminal works to extend Berth 2 to accommodate the current trend of larger sized vessels and construction of a new Berth 1 to handle cargo are underway. This project is expected to be completed in 2022 at total project cost of US\$16.4M.

The PAJ has been engaged with the Urban Development Corporation (UDC) with a view to transforming the Montego Freeport Roadway between the roundabout and the eastern boundary of its terminal.

The aim is to create a pedestrian friendly stretch of roadway with provision for cycling and mopeds, vehicular traffic and buses for transporting guests and locals along this roadway in an orderly and appealing manner. The intention is to interconnect this roadway with the other developments being implemented by the UDC along the Montego Bay Waterfront creating a walking trail for guests and locals alike.

Artisan Village at the Hampden Wharf in Falmouth

Madam Speaker, last year during the Pandemic, the Authority, in partnership with and funding from the Tourism Enhancement Fund (TEF), completed construction of a new Artisan Village at the Old Hampden Wharf at a cost of J\$730M to facilitate skilled craftspeople producing and selling their wares directly on the terminal.

The new 35,000 square-foot Artisan Village comprising crafts shops, restaurants and performance spaces has been completed and handed over to the Tourism Enhancement Fund which will be responsible for the theming and operation of the Artisan Village.



New Town Centre in Falmouth

Madam Speaker, the PAJ is now focused on the creation of a new town centre in Falmouth, combining the conveniences and aesthetics of a modern urban town with elements of the existing Georgian architecture. The multi-year project is to be developed as a Public-Private Partnership located on 50 acres of land owned by the Authority adjacent to the terminal and to the existing historic town. The new town centre will feature modern mixed-use spaces including commercial and housing facilities, a civic square, town commons, a promenade, mini-parks and a redeveloped drag line. We intend to make Falmouth with all its rich history, a premier destination for cruise and attractions, as well as centre for life-style and long stay leisure, given the rapid expansion of middle income housing in the parish of Trelawny.

Reconstruction of the Reynolds Pier in Ocho Rios

Madam Speaker, the Reynolds Pier in Ocho Rios has been reconstructed to create a second berthing facility capable of accommodating the largest classes of cruise vessels.

A new promenade has been installed linking the Reynolds Pier to the Ocho Rios Fishing Village, Island Village, the Main Cruise Terminal and the Town of Ocho Rios. The project, completed at a cost of US\$22M, complements the work being undertaken to upgrade the town of Ocho Rios. Ocho Rios, which enjoys the largest concentration of attractions in the Caribbean now has a new face and is positioned to establish itself as a top tier Cruise Destination.

Port Royal Cruise Terminal

Madam Speaker, you will recall last year we welcomed three cruise vessels at the new Port Royal Cruise Terminal before the Cruise Sector was shut down due to COVID-19 in April 2020. A second phase of works to construct a new museum, restaurant and entertainment facilities will be completed in 2021/22.

Madam Speaker, throughout the process, care has been taken to integrate the community in the development process. A new promenade linking the terminal to the town has been constructed.

Several projects were undertaken in the town including the rebuilding of the Old Ferry Pier, rehabilitation and painting of sections of the Brotherhood building complex, repairs to roadways and drainage systems, curb and sidewalk improvements and installation of new signage.

These initiatives were a model of multi-agency collaboration including the PAJ, UDC, TEF, National Works Agency (NWA), National Water Commission (NWC), National Housing Trust (NHT), Jamaica Social Investment Fund (JSIF), Kingston & St. Andrew Municipal Corporation (KSAMC), Social Development Commission (SDC) and the Jamaica National Heritage Trust (JNHT).

Madam Speaker, with these developments, Jamaica intends to be a leader in the Cruise Sector in the hemisphere.

We have five distinctive terminals, each featuring a range of attractions in proximity, and all are near an international airport. Montego Bay is ideally equipped as a homeporting facility. This is a segment of the Cruise Sector that we intend to grow significantly.

All our facilities can accommodate the bunkering of fuel while the vessels are at berth and Jamaica is currently the only country capable of bunkering LNG, the fastest growing fuel type for the new generation of cruise vessels currently being built.

Madam Speaker, cruise tourism can have great socio-economic impact if we position ourselves to maximize the returns - the artisans, tour guides, agriculture sector, our creative talent, adventure and cultural experiences and communities can benefit greatly.

Kingston Logistics Park

Madam Speaker, with a 30-year concession agreement in place for the Kingston Container Terminal (KCT), the PAJ has turned its attention to developing land holdings immediately adjacent to the KCT into a “Near Port Logistics Centre”.

The PAJ has constructed a 200,000 square-foot Logistics facility built to international logistics specifications on a section of land immediately beside the main entrance to the Kingston Container Terminal.

Given the centrality of security to the development of transshipment and logistics in Kingston, the PAJ has also constructed a state-of-the-art security complex with its own container inspection facilities housing the Jamaica Customs Agency's Contraband Enforcement Team and the US Container Security Initiative.

Portmore Informatics Park

Madam Speaker, recognizing the potential of the large secondary and tertiary trained workforce in Portmore and the greater St. Catherine region, PAJ has developed 160,000 sq. ft of modern facilities designed to attract the top BPO companies. A specific goal is to encourage these companies to commit to higher value-added work allowing Jamaica to move up the value chain in the global outsourcing sector. When added to the existing 50,000 sq. ft. building at the site, which has now also been upgraded, the new complex forms a unique campus environment ideally suited for the global outsourcing sector. Constructed at a cost of US\$21M, the campus is expected to accommodate up to 4,000 new employees.

Construction of the buildings is complete, and the external works are expected to be completed in May 2021. Tenanting is at an advanced stage.

Listing of PAJ's Existing Portfolio of Assets

Madam Speaker, we have commenced the packaging of the existing portfolio of assets in the Montego Bay Special Economic Zone and the Portmore Informatics Park with a view to listing them on the Jamaica Stock Exchange. These developments have been very successful undertakings, consistently enjoying occupancy levels of over 95% and have been used to catalyse the development of the BPO sector in Montego Bay and now, Portmore.

Madam Speaker, listing these assets on the Stock Exchange is consistent with the Government's stated policy of using the capital markets to socialise wealth and allow for broad-based ownership of the productive assets of the country. Like the highly successful IPOs of Wigton and Transjamaican Highway in previous years, we will enable all Jamaicans to participate in ownership of a sector which is poised for even greater growth.

Madam Speaker, we are making the investments as we reimagine the future of the tourism and global outsourcing sector, ensuring Jamaica recovers faster, stronger, and better.

Urban Development Corporation

Madam Speaker, I now turn to the UDC which attained ISO 9001:2015 Certification this year. As would have been expected with closures of attractions under its portfolio, UDC project funding and timelines have been affected due to the pandemic.

Despite this, the UDC was able to achieve quite a few milestones in the fiscal year 2020/21 such as the completion of Harmony Beach Park in Montego Bay, styled as the Emancipation Park of the West. This is a major development for the city of Montego Bay in sustainable and integrated public spaces for the people. It is the UDC's flagship project in Montego Bay and will be opened to the public as soon as COVID-19 related restrictions will allow.



It is a free access beach park which spans 16 acres of open-air public access complete with a food court, a multipurpose sport court, children's play area and a variety of entertainment spaces. The development incorporates renewable and sustainable technologies with solar power and jogging track fabricated from recycled tyres. The facility was constructed within budget at a cost of J\$1.3 billion and completed with a four-month delay in 22 months due to the pandemic.

Madam Speaker, for 2021/22, the UDC will focus on projects that will offer major climate resilient infrastructure and sustainable public spaces for residents and visitors.

These include:

- Montego Bay Waterfront: Building on the successful completion of the Harmony Beach park, there will be additional complementary waterfront developments including
 - 1) the construction of Groyne and Sill infrastructure to protect current and future investments scheduled to be completed in 2021/22 and
 - 2) Development of the concept and feasibility studies for the Montego Oceanarium – a Climate and Ocean Conservation Living Museum - the first of its kind in the Caribbean region.

This project supports Jamaica's expansion on its Blue Economy policy direction and will see the convergence of urban development and environmental management in the tourism capital of Montego Bay.

- Kingston Waterfront: The UDC will advance the development of the Kingston Harbour Walk - a comprehensive project that includes both climate resilience infrastructure and related public open space in the form of a 28km/17mile linear park from Ocean Boulevard in Downtown Kingston to Port Royal.
- This project will build on the coastal protection that exists in sections including the Downtown Kingston Ocean Boulevard seawall from the 1970s, the Palisadoes rock revetments from the 2010's as well as the revetment between Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Rae Town currently under construction by the Jamaica Social Investment Fund (JSIF).
- This transformative Harbour Walk development will comprise a combination of scenic vistas and parks, a coastal and roadside promenade providing active and passive spaces for recreational (jogging, cycling etc) and entertainment purposes. Economic activity will also flourish with commercial opportunities all along the walk, featuring restaurants and spaces for pop up entertainment, bringing an enhanced quality of life to the capital city Kingston in the manner of the Latin American 'Malecon' or the Middle Eastern 'Corniche'.
- **Portmore Town Centre, St. Catherine** – This project will involve development of a Climate Park in collaboration with Portmore Municipal Corporation (PMC) and the Climate Change Division (CCD).
- As one of Jamaica's largest residential communities with a population of over 270,000, the welfare and quality of life of Portmore citizens requires focused attention to support its

planned parish status. It is important that urban amenities including requisite managed public space are developed and retrofitted to prepare for a climate resilient future.

The park in the Portmore town centre is over 14 acres of prime UDC lands that display our commitment to urban green spaces as the key next project in the 'Park In Every Parish' initiative and provide opportunities for health, wellness and generally improved environment at the centre of Portmore.

Madam Speaker, through the UDC we are making the kind of investment in urban spaces to ensure that Jamaica's recovery is sustainable, urbane, and improves quality of life.

National Road Operating and Constructing Company Limited

The Montego Bay Perimeter Road Project – A National Development Project

Madam Speaker, Jamaica is preparing for economic recovery by preparing significant infrastructural development projects that will improve productivity, stimulate growth and boost employment.



Among these projects is the Montego Bay Perimeter Road Project which is made up of the following sections:

- i. Montego Bay Bypass approx. 14.9 km
- ii. Barnett Street/West Green Avenue road rehabilitation
- iii. Long Hill Bypass approx. 10.5 km
- iv. Drainage Study of the Montego Bay Bypass area

I will deal with each, one by one.

Montego Bay Bypass

Montego Bay is Jamaica's number one tourist destination. Montego Bay also has an international airport which, in normal times, is Jamaica's busiest. In addition, the Montego Bay Port welcomed cruise ships to its port at least 2 days per week prior to COVID 19.

Traffic congestion has been a longstanding issue in the City of Montego Bay as there is essentially one main thoroughfare connecting the east with west.

A 2017 study of traffic through the City showed that daily traffic reached in excess of 57,845 vehicles per day which is the highest traffic volume island wide, outside of the Kingston and St. Andrew area, and exceeds the capacity of the main thoroughfare by over 11,000 vehicles per day. Even with tourism at multi-decade lows in terms of occupancy, Montego Bay is congested. It is anticipated that once the world gets over COVID-19, tourism in Montego Bay will continue to grow and the congestion will worsen.

Growth in the tourism sector will result in additional traffic being generated by the Airport and Sea Port, as well as additional traffic throughput in the city to access various attractions in and around Montego Bay; this includes traffic intending to bypass the city. The commercial centre with all its amenities lies at the heart of the city with its main thoroughfare along the coast. A bypass for Montego Bay has been contemplated for at least twenty (20) years, given the growth of the town and the development of the tourism industry in the St. James and neighbouring parishes.

Madam Speaker, the time has come to finally get the Montego Bay Bypass done.

Long Hill Bypass/Barnett Street/West green Upgrades

The Long Hill Bypass includes a 10.5 km bypass of the treacherous section of Long Hill which connects the Montego Bay area to the south coast via Montpelier.

The Project will improve access from Montego Bay to Jamaica's South Coast by providing a direct connection to the May Pen to Williamsfield Leg of Highway 2000.

The Montego Bay Perimeter Project will complement the work that was done by the National Works Agency (NWA) under the Ferris Cross to Mackfield Road Improvement Project, in Westmoreland through the MIDP.

The long-term effect of the Montego Bay Perimeter Project will therefore be to provide an interconnection to the island wide road network, that is, both the tolled road network as well as main road network.

These works when completed will allow for a four (4) lane Highway network which connects Kingston to Montego Bay.

Also included will be the rehabilitation, expansion and widening of Barnett Street and West Green Avenue to complement works being done on the Montego Bay Bypass section of the Project.

Montego Bay's need for a Comprehensive Drainage Solution

Madam Speaker, there have been perennial issues caused by flooding in the city of Montego Bay, which has resulted in significant loss of productivity and damage to property and businesses. We saw this vividly only two years ago with images widely circulated on social and traditional media of excessive flooding caused by a few days' rainfall.

The cause of the frequent and severe flooding during heavy rainfall events can be attributed to the significant urbanization of the City over the past four decades resulting in increased storm runoff, inadequate drainage to convey the increased runoff, improper garbage disposal with garbage being dumped into the drainage channels, etc.

In addition to the direct flood damage costs, recent flood events in Montego Bay have resulted in many schools and businesses being forced to close, persons missing their flights, visitors finding it difficult to get back to their cruise ships, and residents and commuters being stranded. The effect of these flood impacts, if not addressed, will only continue to stymie the growth and prosperity of the city and people of Montego Bay and Jamaica as a whole. The need for a comprehensive drainage solution for the City of Montego Bay is therefore urgently required.

Undertaking a Drainage Study of the Montego Bay Perimeter road area as part of the Montego Bay Perimeter Road Project presents an opportunity for the various Government Agencies to collaborate on identifying and addressing the drainage problems in the area.

Funding of the Montego Bay Perimeter Project

Madam Speaker, early in the last term, when we began the development of this Project, it was originally envisaged that the Montego Bay Perimeter Road Project would be financed through a loan from the China EXIM Bank and, as such, China Harbour Engineering would be contracted to build out the project.

This would have been similar to how the North South Highway was developed as well as the Southern Coastal Highway Improvement Project.

Madam Speaker, we proceeded on that basis and CHEC did much of the preliminary work to get us to this point.

However, the Ministry of Finance and the Public Service subsequently indicated that Jamaica did not need to borrow from China to implement the project. We could finance this infrastructure development with our own resources. This would be the first major highway development financed with our own resources, and not linked to a loan.

Highway 2000 was done with borrowed money.

The North South Highway was done with borrowed money

The South Coast Highway was done with borrowed money.

Madam Speaker, I am pleased to say, that the Montego Bay Perimeter Project will be undertaken and completed without borrowed funds.

I stated this publicly in 2019 and conveyed this personally to the President of the People's Republic of China on my visit.

Madam Speaker, this is a good day for Jamaica. Even in a pandemic, we will develop our infrastructure with the resources of the people of Jamaica. The Cabinet has declared the Montego Bay Perimeter Project as a National Development Project. This Project will be one of the most important infrastructure development projects in Western Jamaica in recent times.

As such, following Cabinet's approval, the Minister of Finance and the Public Service will bring an Order to Parliament, subject to affirmative resolution, for the declaration of the Montego Bay Perimeter Project as a National Development Project.

Madam Speaker, it is the Government's intention that once this Order has been affirmed, the Government will contract directly with China Harbour Engineering as the contractor of the project as provided for under the Public Procurement Act of 2015.

Madam Speaker, Jamaica values our strategic partnership with China, in trade and infrastructure development. China Harbour has performed with respect to the North South Highway, when others left that project. And they are performing on the South Coast Highway Improvement Project. Furthermore, they have worked with the Government in the conceptualisation, planning

and preliminary designs of the Montego Bay Perimeter Project as it was being done on the traditional model used with current and past highway development projects.

It is the intention of the Government, that, going forward, after this project, Jamaica will develop the capacity to not only fund highway infrastructure projects with our own resources, but also to design and implement a sophisticated international bidding process, that attracts multiple international firms, for the selection of the contractor.

This will require capacity building and we are working with the World Bank and the US Treasury to develop this capacity.

National Works Agency

Madam Speaker, the National Works Agency (NWA) which also became ISO certified, will continue to execute its mandate to plan, build and maintain a safe, reliable and efficient main road network and flood control systems.

During 2020, the agency cleared 206 roads island-wide that were severely affected by various rain-related events, which rendered some communities inaccessible.

In addition, to utilizing its own equipment, the Agency was able to leverage donor support of equipment from the JDF and some private sector partners. To date, approximately J\$1 billion has been spent to reopen blocked roads.

For 2021/2022, a primary focus will be on improving the condition of the main road network, which was damaged in 2020 during the Zeta, Eta and Delta rain events.

We must also mitigate against these events and so to enhance our flood control response, the agency will be undertaking works to reconstruct the gully walls and inverts on parts of the Sandy Gully in St. Andrew, North and South Gullies in St. James and the Greater Portmore Gully in St. Catherine.

Southern Coastal Highway Improvement Project (SCHIP)

The NWA's main capital road project for fiscal year 2021/22 will remain the Southern Coastal Highway Improvement Project (SCHIP). During the year, we will commence works on five (5) additional contract packages valued at some J\$6.6 billion. The five packages are:

- Package #1 – Yallahs Bridge to Loudon Hill (Salt Pond) - 6.72 km
- Package #2 – Loudon Hill (Salt Pond) to Pomfret - 4.90 km
- Package #3 – Pamphret – Morant River Bridge - 9.55 km
- Package #12 – Boston Area – Drapers - 7.44 km
- Package #13 – Drapers – Port Antonio - 9.52 km



Map: Showing Existing Road Corridor (in yellow) and Original Proposed Alignment (in red) of the Southern Coastal Highway

To date, measured works valued at approximately US\$53 million have been certified under the SCHIP. Pipeline and sewerage installation works valued at some US\$29M will continue to be rolled-out in tandem with road works.

Madam Speaker, the Southern Coastal Highway Improvement Project is expected to open up new areas for tourism development, and improved traffic flow in several urban centres via bypasses to a number of congested townships including Port Antonio.

Madam Speaker, bridges are a critical component of our infrastructure programme, the Barracks River Bridge in St. Mary, Liguanea Avenue Bridge in St. Andrew and Riverton City Bridge in Kingston were completed in 2020/21. For the 2021/22, the focus will be on completing the Mahogany Vale Bridge in St. Thomas, the Tiber River Bridge in St. Mary and the Golden Vale Bridge in Portland. Construction on the Penfield Bridge #2 in St. Andrew is also expected to commence alongside repairs to other bridges.

Lengthman Programme

Madam Speaker, I had announced the Lengthman Programme last year – a programme of preventative maintenance of our critical infrastructure to be implemented at the community level by local residents. While details for a pilot of the programme were prepared, it was delayed as a result of the pandemic as well as the need to respond to the damage to the road network resulting from flood rains that began in July 2020 and continued to November 2020.

However, the NWA is ready to commence the Lengthman Programme in 2021/2022 with a pilot that will run from Dunrobin Avenue, along Washington Boulevard, Mandela Highway leading to the Jose Marti Round-a-bout.

In 2021/2022, the NWA will continue work to identify areas along improved road corridors with developmental potential towards catalysing growth.

Based on the Government's infrastructure investment, the Hagley Park, Constant Spring and Barbican areas will see residential and commercial valuations increased with upward adjustments in the proposed density under revised Development Orders. To fully maximize this opportunity, the Government will move to aggressively partner with the Private Sector, and will explore the use of a modified Impact Fee-based Scheme to incentivize and unleash the development potential along the recently improved road corridors within the KMA.

Madam Speaker, the Government is targeting its capital expenditure towards projects that are capable of fast implementation to boost economic growth, development and productivity by: creating additional employment; increasing mobility of people and goods; improving connectivity between major commercial centres; reducing time lost in traffic; and providing essential infrastructure that encourages and facilitates future development/re-development.

Madam Speaker, six (6) projects have been identified that will address recurrent congestion, improve road safety (especially for vulnerable pedestrians), provide water supply & sewerage, reduce vehicle operating costs, and support future development.

1. Widening of Braeton Road and Hellshire Main Road
2. Dualization of Grange Lane
3. Dualization of East Kings House Road and Lady Musgrave Road
4. Widening of Arthur Wint Drive
5. Washington Boulevard Bridge (Patrick City)
6. Access to Portmore via Highway 2000 East-West

The agency will also be implementing a J\$50M Road Safety Programme, which will see the installation of raised pavement markers along the North Coast Highway and other road corridors. In addition to being relatively inexpensive, raised pavement markers improve road visibility and tactile feedback to restore driver attention.

The Jamaica Special Economic Zone Authority

Madam Speaker, at the end of March 2020, 98 percent, or 131 of a total of 134 approved Free Zone entities had transitioned to the new Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Regime. This number, together with the 52 new SEZ Developers who entered into Licencing Agreements with the Authority brought the complement of SEZ entities to 183 - representing a growth trajectory of 30 percent under the new regime.

With the coming on stream of these SEZ entities, the Government of Jamaica has increased revenues and employment. Madam Speaker, the “Economic” in SEZ also means “Employment”.

The SEZs are spread across 11 parishes with the aim of stimulating development of commercial and logistical infrastructure to catalyze the economy.

Jamaica’s SEZs embrace a range of services including - training, incubation space, warehousing and distribution, logistics, manufacturing, assembly, and production facilities. Currently, the regime boasts 26.6 million square feet of designated SEZ area; and we are pleased to report that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, there are 12 new Zones under construction, in a variety of industries, totaling 1.1 M sq. ft. of committed space.

Madam Speaker, business confidence in the SEZ model, which was established as an economic stimulus strategy, continues to grow, with heightened local and foreign investor interest in a wide cross-section of traditional, as well as new and emerging industries. The Authority is currently in discussions with a number of prospective investors at different stages of their projects. These include; educational, medical/pharmaceutical, film, petrochemical and other commercial industries;

The Development Bank of Jamaica

Madam Speaker, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are key drivers of our economy. In response to the impact of COVID-19, the DBJ undertook several measures to support our MSMEs such as reduction of interest rates on loans and granting moratoriums on over 30,000 loans valued at J\$14.95 billion, this includes \$2 billion of micro loans. Between April 2020 and January 31, 2021, the DBJ approved \$4 billion in loans supporting \$5.7 billion in investments and 2,745 potential new jobs.

The DBJ is currently executing a US\$15 Million project funded by the World Bank, which is focused on improving access to finance for MSMEs. A key component of this project is the expansion of the Credit Enhancement Facility (CEF) for MSMEs that are deficient in collateral. Between April 2020 and January 2021, 163 guarantees valued at \$851.2 million have been issued, supporting loans of \$1.5 billion to MSMEs.

The Government has secured funding of US\$25M or approximately JMD\$3.7 billion from the IDB and the World Bank to increase the capital of the CEF and expand the guarantees available to MSMEs.

As of January 31, 2020, the DBJ introduced a new guarantee scheme that is less bureaucratic; if the approved financial institution approves the loan, it is insured under the new scheme; there is no more paperwork required from the DBJ. A greater number of MSMEs are benefitting from this, as 98% of loans are to MSMEs. Also, loans guaranteed have been increased up to 90% from 80% in special cases, with a maximum of \$30 million for any one loan, up from \$15 million previously.

The DBJ will be launching “Go Digital” on 1 April 2021 - a new and revolutionary technical assistance programme geared to promote the adoption of cutting-edge technology practices among MSMEs by providing vouchers that are redeemable at approved Business Development Organisations. The Go Digital vouchers will cover:

- Digital Transformation (digitalization of key processes, such as payment and accounting systems, integration of new software tools to improve productivity), and
- Web-based marketing package (Development /improvement of website, digital marketing, App development, Social Media content creation)

Madam Speaker, Cabinet recently gave approval for the establishment of an Enterprise Team to proceed with the sale of over 1,000 acres for the Greater Bernard Lodge Development. The DBJ is supporting the Enterprise Team.

The Greater Bernard Lodge project seeks to create sustainable community where residents will live, raise families, work and play and retire in dignity. The objective of the enterprise team is to oversee sale discrete lots to serious developers through a competitive tender process (international and local).

The Greater Bernard Lodge project is supported and guided by a Master Development Plan which outlines the location of the development blocks and permitted development types as follows:

- Residential Blocks (Detached & Townhouse)
- Light Industrial
- Commercial
- Mixed Use

I am projecting that by latest June of this year the tender process will be opened. Interested persons should bear in mind that the land is not for speculation. Purchase of the land carries an impact fee and return clause if the development does not begin in the specified time. Infrastructure works on water and sewerage has already began.

Madam Speaker, the pandemic has set back plans for the public offerings of Jamaica Mortgage Bank and the Government's 19.9% share in the Jamaica Public Service Company Limited on the Jamaica Stock Exchange.

Madam Speaker, this administration is committed to creating an ownership economy which allows all Jamaicans to become part owners of the productive assets of the economy. The DBJ is quite advance in its planning for the public offerings of these assets, and as soon as we are certain of the appetite of the market to give the best value for the asset we will proceed.

LAND AND ENVIRONMENT

National Land Agency

Madam Speaker, it is proven that access to registered title has a positive economic and social impact.

In 2020/2021, the NLA has been able to enact legislative amendments to facilitate increased registration of parcels and to establish the framework for the systematic registration regime.

The amendment of the registration of Titles, Cadastral Mapping and Tenure Clarification (Special Provisions) (Amendment) Act 2020 and Registration of Titles (Amendment) Act 2020, will result in a more efficient and organized approach to adjudicating land ownership which aims to increase the level of registration.

Last fiscal year, the NLA also launched the Systematic Land Registration Public Awareness Campaign with the slogan: NLA + You = Title Fi You. The campaign consists of radio and press advertisements (Jamaica, North America and UK), local town criers, interviews with local media houses (JIS, TVJ, RJR) with specific emphasis on the Diaspora through the 'Home and Away' online TV.

Additionally, the agency has launched an upgraded version of Jamaica Property Sales Data (JAMPROP) which is an online subscription service that allows subscribers to access property sales data for the entire island.

The Government is undertaking a major land titling effort and is targeting to deliver 20,000 Titles in three years with 10,000 Titles being issued in Year 1.

Field work (surveyors and legal teams) is ongoing and parts of St. Elizabeth, including Flagaman, Haughton, Burnt Savannah, Masemure known as Canaan Despicle, Westmoreland and Bronte Plantation, Manchester and Clarendon are districts that have been declared as Systematic Adjudication Areas.

Furthermore, the NLA will implement an electronic title registration system available to professionals (attorneys, mortgagees and surveyors) to replace the existing paper-based system. This will result in faster processing times for the registration of transactions, for example, mortgages and transfers.

National Environment and Planning Agency

Protection of Ecologically Sensitive and Significant Areas

Madam Speaker, the COVID-19 pandemic is inextricably intertwined with global environmental issues both in terms of its origin and the implications for environmental outcomes and the future well-being of societies; issues such as biodiversity loss brought on by increased human encroachment into wildlife habitats, climate change, air and water pollution, and waste management.

Through the recovery plans that we are putting in place, we have the potential to create a recovery that is both green and inclusive. We can create opportunities for income, jobs and growth, and at the same time accelerate action on environmental goals, both nationally and globally. Such action will significantly enhance our resilience in the face of accelerating environmental challenges.

The designation of national protected areas - both terrestrial and marine protected areas - has become an important tool that several countries globally are utilising for the conservation and maintenance of biodiversity in all its aspects, including the diversity of species and ecosystems. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, between 2010 and 2019, protected areas expanded from covering 14.1% to 15.3% of global land and freshwater environments (excluding Antarctica) and from 2.9% to 7.5% of the marine realm. While there has been progress, these are still short of the global targets set in 2010 of 17% of terrestrial and inland water, and 10% of coastal and marine areas to be protected.

To be meaningful and enforceable, mere designation of national protected areas is not enough. It needs to be supported by a legal and policy framework to materialise significant biodiversity conservation targets.

Madam Speaker, the Government will be promulgating a new Protected Areas Act to enable the creation and regulation of a National Protected Areas System (NPAS) that is representative of Jamaica's biological and cultural heritage. The legislation will include harmonized provisions for management of private lands in protected areas under a new comprehensive statute while at the same time preserving specific statutory functions under other enactments.

NEPA, in consultation with partner agencies, has so far selected fifteen (15) areas which are proposed for protection. Some of these lands are under private ownership, while others are

owned by various arms of Government. There are no distinctions made in law regarding who the land is owned by for the declaration of protected areas. **Madam Speaker**, there are several incentives, partnership and acquisition options that are available to the Government to work with private owners to ensure that these sites are effectively managed and protected. These include acquisition, tax and other incentives, and exchanges/swaps of land.

Madam Speaker, we will recover faster, stronger, better and greener.

Madam Speaker, I have directed that NEPA in collaboration with the Kingston and St. Andrew Municipal Corporation (KSAMC) and other stakeholders to prepare master plans for Half Way Tree and Constant Spring Road Local Planning Areas.

Half-Way Tree is a major commercial node and there is now a need to make it a smart, sustainable, resilient, technology-driven and a model 21st century inclusive community. Over the years HWT has been affected by many issues, including uncoordinated development, traffic congestion, inadequate parking, lack of public open space and landmarks, and improper solid waste collection and disposal.

The preparation of the master plan will provide a holistic and sustainable approach to land use planning and address issues relating to building densities, heights, economy, physical and social infrastructure and protection of the natural environment.

The Constant Spring corridor adjoins or is in close proximity to the centrally located Half Way Tree Local Planning Area therefore providing the synergy to plan for both areas. Over the years, the Constant Spring area has experienced an increase in development and has come under extreme pressure with land use conflicts, transportation and traffic issues, insufficient parking, solid waste disposal, lack of green space among other issues.

The expected outcomes with efficient management would be as follows:

- Detailed spatial planning policies, proposed land use zoning and model plans
- Increased density and heights in selected areas
- Increased investment, employment and economic growth/development
- Protection of existing residential amenities and creation of mixed-use choices
- Provision of developed and interconnected green/open spaces
- Greater pedestrianization and landscaping
- Improved infrastructure and service facilities

Madam Speaker, we will recover with the plans and policies we are putting in place at NEPA Jamaica's recovery will be faster, sustainable, orderly and greener.

Water

National Water Commission

Arising from the catastrophic break of the major transmission line at Ferry in December 2018 and compounded by the extensive droughts in 2019 which extended to the middle of 2020, large sections of the KMA and many other sections of the island suffered from inadequate supplies of potable water.

Despite the limited financial resources, the NWC has responded and having completed the replacement of the Mandela Highway pipeline, the flows into the Corporate Area have doubled from 2.5 imgd to 5 imgd.



We are now, midway into the December to May dry season and both raw water storage facilities are full. This has been achieved because the NWC has carefully monitored the inflows to the Hermitage and Mona raw water impoundments and synchronized with the production of treated water with any resulting shortfalls being addressed by reconfiguring the distribution network.

Madam Speaker, significant progress was made during 2020/2021 in replacing aged water and sewage pipelines in the corporate area. Over 40 km of large diameter aged water and sewage pipelines were replaced along Constant Spring and Hagley Park Road as well as along Mandela

Highway. This has improved the resilience of the major conveyance network in Kingston and St. Andrew (KSA).

The NWC can now move water much more efficiently from its Constant Spring Water Treatment Plant and the Rio Cobre production sources into the heart of the corporate area.

Similar works are now in progress from Six Miles along the full length of Spanish Town Road, Beeston Street and will terminate at the intersection of Blake Road and South Camp Roads. A total of 20 km of transmission, secondary and distribution mains are being installed at a cost of \$4 billion. This will not only improve the NWC's capacity to transmit water to the downtown Kingston business district but will also, on completion at the beginning of 2022, see significant improvement in the supply to all adjoining communities, including Riverton Meadows, Weymouth Drive, Cockburn Gardens, Payne Avenue, Waltham Park, lower Trench Town, Denham Town, Tivoli Gardens, Kingston Gardens and Central Kingston.

Similar projects are being formulated for Red Hills, Arthur Wint Drive, Port Royal and sections of the North Coast between Mammee Bay and Falmouth.

To complement the latter, improvements are being made to the Martha Brae Water Treatment plant river intake works which will result in an increase in its production capacity from 9 to 11 million imperial gallons per day.

For the other parishes which were adversely affected in the 2019/2020 dry season, similar short term measures have been put in place to ameliorate the effects while implementation has already commenced on medium to long term solutions such as upgrading of the Greater Mandeville water supply at a cost of \$3.5 billion.

Housing

National Housing Trust

Madam Speaker, the total assets of the National Housing Trust are projected to increase to \$313 billion by March 2022, of which 91% or \$285 billion will be in housing, comprising mortgages and work in progress.

The growth in assets has been significant when compared to March 2016, when total assets were \$237 billion with 84% or \$200 billion representing investments in housing.

Madam Speaker, NHT's Annual Housing Expenditure has grown from an average of \$20 billion in 2014-2016 to a projected \$58 billion in 2021/2022. We are moving in the right direction.

Madam Speaker, the Government recognizing the critical contribution of housing to economic and social development, has put down the challenge to the housing sector to substantially

increase housing starts. I have held meetings with the private and public sector stakeholders, including the NHT.



I should remind the House, **Madam Speaker**, that the Government had also issued a further challenge. This is for a majority of the solutions through collaboration with the private sector being priced around \$8 million.

The target has been set as we seek to meet the demand from our recent graduates, and our workers who have been diligently saving for the opportunity of homeownership. Madam Speaker, I want to encourage all workers to start making your NHT contributions if you have not yet started and to become current if you had been contributing and stopped.

Within the next two months, Madam Speaker, the NHT will be advertising for local and foreign developers who are interested in participating in this segment of the housing market.

Madam Speaker, we are cognizant of the position some mortgagors have found themselves in over the last several months as a result of the pandemic. To help these mortgagors, the National Housing Trust implemented the **Fresh Start Rescheduling Facility** in May 2020. The Facility provided financial relief for mortgagors with arrears of 90 days or more, as at February 29, 2020, by allowing them a “one off” special arrangement that saw the amount owing being re-calculated.

Those who have benefited from the Facility saw their arrears added to the principal and their loan amount adjusted. Some mortgagors were also eligible to receive a reduction in interest rate based on their income as well as an extension in mortgage tenure.

These allowances improved their ability to service their loans. To date, a total of 1,966 applications have been processed under the “Fresh Start” Programme which expired on September 30, 2020.

Madam Speaker, mortgagors who are in need of further assistance continue to benefit from other established relief programmes maintained by the NHT. To date, the following applications have been processed:

- Special loan moratorium, 2,057;
- Regular Loan Modification, 2,308;
- Regular Moratorium, 202.

Extension of Cash Refunds for Public Sector Workers

Madam Speaker, since 2016, some 26,300 public sector mortgagors have been receiving their contribution refund in cash, annually. This cash refund is unlike what obtains for regular mortgagors whose contribution refund is paid directly to their NHT mortgage accounts.

When this provision was initially established, it was based on the economic situation which resulted in a wage freeze under the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Public Sector Workers and the Government.

In my 2018/19 Budget Presentation, I spoke of extending the cash refund granted by the NHT to eligible public sector workers and indicated that the period of extension would end this year, 2021. Madam Speaker, with the impact of COVID-19, such an extension is once again needed. Consequently, the NHT will extend the Cash Refunds granted to Public Sector Workers to April 2022.

Relief for Unemployed Contributors/Mortgagors

Madam Speaker, as part of the COVID-19 effort, the NHT will allow persons who have been unemployed for a period of 12 months or more to access their contribution refund one year in advance.

Therefore, if the contributor’s refund is due for the year 2013 and that contributor has lost his/her job due to the pandemic, the contributor may access the refund of 2013 contributions and also access, the refund for the following year, 2014. The proposed implementation date for this initiative is July 2021. The initiative will expire in July 2022.

The NHT Strategic Review and the New Business Model

In November 2017, the Report of the Strategic Review Commission was presented to me and subsequently tabled in Parliament. Arising from recommendations in the report, the Trust has examined and implemented the following for improvement:

- **Madam Speaker**, the Trust has also taken steps to monetize its mortgage portfolio to ensure that the level of housing expenditure is well maintained. The NHT holds the largest mortgage portfolio in Jamaica. The Trust has been strategically leveraging that position through the sale of portions of this mortgage portfolio which has allowed capital to be used in more effective ways.

As a direct result of this strategic move **Construction management**: greater emphasis will be placed on housing delivery through initiatives such as:

- The Developer's Programme
- The Guaranteed Purchase Programme
- **Contribution management**: There will be the implementation of strategies which will encourage improved collections and promote stronger partnership among Government entities which fall within the ambit of the payroll amalgamation exercise.
- **Loan processing**: the model will be amended to enable greater efficiencies in the services currently offered.

Madam Speaker, with improved efficiencies, the Trust will be better able to support the Government's plan to build 70,000 housing solutions as it is positioned to contribute some 43,000 housing solutions, over the next five (5) years.

Research and Development Programme

The achievement of our low cost housing targets will require that we make some changes to our approach to construction by undertaking research into new building systems, possibly using alternative materials, that are sturdy, environmentally and aesthetically pleasing, and affordable. We also seek to implement a collaborative framework among the utility companies as well as public and private sector developers for the development of central infrastructure, to take advantage of the economies of scale as we seek to make housing more affordable.

New Social Housing Programme

Madam Speaker, in particular in our New Social Housing Programme in a thrust to ensure value for money and to engage our most creative minds, we will be launching a Low Cost Housing Design Competition to design housing solutions that incorporate innovative use of building materials, demonstrate climate resilience and are affordable and functional.

We know and we have seen through the Competition for the Design of the Parliament Building that this is an ideal way to derive value and innovation.

CONCLUSION

Madam Speaker, after all that the Minister of Finance and Planning and I have said, we can arrive at certain conclusions.

We can conclude that good policy pays dividends.

We can conclude that this is a government of incredible dexterity and facility to manage several crises, balance competing interests, maintain equity and transparency, exercise patience and restraint and still show material solidarity and care for people of Jamaica.

We can conclude that, in the midst of crisis, this government has not faltered and we are turning crisis into opportunity.

We are using the challenges thrust upon us by the pandemic as an opportunity to reconfigure and reorganise our society into a smarter, greener, safer, more caring society.

Madam Speaker, the people of Jamaica gave this government a resounding victory at the polls. We do not take this for granted. We will never forget the poor, the vulnerable and the weak in our society. Our task is to empower the people of this country with equal opportunity, world class infrastructure, access to technology, access to finance and the opportunity to fulfil their deepest aspirations.

Madam Speaker, we do not do this of our own volition. We consider this to be God's work and we are instruments of its execution. With our faith and trust in God's word in Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future".

God bless you all and God bless Jamaica, Land we love.

