

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 674-19(2): FUTURE OF TOURISM

March 11, 2021

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Industry, Tourism and Investment. My statement today outlined the seismic shift in realities facing our tourism industry. Can the Minister give us an update on the status of the new tourism strategy and when we can expect it to be released? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister of Industry, Tourism and Investment.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Sometimes, it does seem that there a lot of steps and processes before things get released, but there is good reason for that. Tourism 2025, I am grateful that committee had the opportunity to look at a draft, and when that step is complete, it goes through Cabinet. The reason for taking some of those steps is to ensure that everyone can speak with one voice on the Cabinet side, that communications are ready to go, and we are now at that point. I am expecting that it can be, indeed, tabled before this session is over. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. It's good news. I have heard consistently from tourism operators and others related in the service sector that one of the most pressing issues is not necessarily developing new products or markets but basic survival. Can the Minister tell us whether the new strategy addresses this issue of survival of tourism operators through the pandemic and whether there are any new programs, services, and funding to support them?

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: That message is indeed loud and clear. It's one that comes to me, as well. It comes to the department. There is absolutely no mistaking, really, across Canada, that the tourism sector has been particularly hard-hit and is going to be slow to recover as a result of the pandemic. The reality is that border restrictions remain in place not only here, but in parts of all of Canada and, of course, internationally. That is having a huge impact and will continue to have an impact. I only say that to underscore the fact that this problem and this challenge is real and ongoing.

Tourism 2025 is the tourism strategy for five years. It's a five-year goal, a five-year plan, so that, at the end of that period, we are back where we were at 2019 levels, when we were on an exciting upward trend of rising, growing visitor attendance and visitor numbers here in the Northwest Territories. The here and now, of course, is really more around making sure that as many tourism operators and hospitality facilities and those that support the industry are there when the reopening begins.

Tourism 2025 isn't going to be a place where there are new programs to support the here and now. The here and now continues to be supported with the programs we have already had in for some time, now with respect to COVID-19 relief, in addition to all the

various types of funding and programming from SEED, for example, at ITI. There are also quite a number of tourism program and products that have been shifted or opened up or encouraged for those who are looking to take some training, looking to shift their infrastructure, looking to create new products. Those funds are there, and we are doing our best continually to top them up. We are focussing on that here and now so that everyone is ready to take advantage of Tourism 2025. Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. It kind of flows well into my next question. With the current travel restrictions in place and the likelihood that they will stay in place, probably for several more months, NWT residents, of course, are looking to explore the Northwest Territories a lot more. We certainly did that last summer ourselves. Can the Minister tell us what she is doing to support staycations and the tourism industry to take advantage of this new market of residents within the Northwest Territories?

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Yes, the staycations program that was supported last year through the Northwest Territories Tourism Association, which is the destination marketing organization, saw a lot of success. It was well-received on social media, traditional media, and we're certainly intending to do the same to see that it can, once again, try to encourage residents to go out and explore our own home and take advantage of opportunities here. To that extent, also again, a lot of the programs that were put in place in response to COVID-19 were to support the businesses to adapt, to pivot. We're, obviously, coming up on a new fiscal year and looking for opportunities for businesses to continue to use those funds, to be ready to receive locals, and to do again what we did last year, which is to support the staycations. I just want to make one other note on that, really, is that the parks, also, which I know has come up here, parks this year knows the challenges it faced last year and will be even better placed to be responsive to those staycationers.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Final supplementary. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I feel like I need a holiday, now. No, seriously, that's all good news. When the pandemic begins to wind down, of course, we can expect that the NWT is going to open up, maybe, first, to other northern territories, and then Canadians, and then, hopefully, the international market again. Can the Minister tell us whether the new strategy accounts for a step-wise reopening of markets and how are we going to support the sector to maximize benefits? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Yes, please. Everyone, go book your staycation right now. That's great news. The strategy has four key priorities in it, and I don't want to get a jump on what I'm sure will be an exciting announcement in the next couple of weeks, but it has strategic priorities that I think do speak to precisely what the Member is looking at. Again, it's not the short-term reopening of borders. That involves the Chief Public Health Officer, as well, but it really does speak to how this industry can be ready for that reopening. In terms of looking at what infrastructure is needed, again, short-term, medium-term, what is needed to support capacity to deliver on those products or on new products that might be developed here, particularly as businesses may be pivoting, and making sure that we improve and enhance the engagement that we have.

While COVID-19 has been challenging, the level of engagement with the industry, with the industry associations, I would say, has gone up significantly, to our benefit, to understand what they've gone through, but now to our benefit, to maintain that so that we continue to see what they need as we go forward. That's how the step-by-step reopening will happen is, again, with those levels of communication there and in conjunction with the partnerships built up with them. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.