



October 05, 2020

Ms. Jennie Bruce, President
Ms. Renée Comeau, Executive Director
NWT Chamber of Commerce
23 Mitchell Drive
PO BOX 1093
YELLOWKNIFE NT X1A 2NB

Dear Ms. Bruce and Ms. Comeau:

COVID-19 Secretariat

Thank you for your letter of September 23, 2020 outlining your concerns over the establishment of the COVID-19 Coordinating Secretariat. The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) agrees that it is important to keep financial and economic sustainability at the forefront of our considerations as we plan our continued pandemic response, and we believe the COVID Secretariat is a responsible use of public resources in the face of the threat that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose to northerners.

The GNWT's initial response to the pandemic earlier this year was quick and effective, in large part because a significant number of government employees, over 160 from across the GNWT departments and agencies, were redeployed to new roles monitoring our borders, enforcing public health orders and answering phones at ProtectNWT. In many cases, these staff members were doing this new work on top of their regular pre-pandemic duties.

This arrangement, while temporarily effective, is not sustainable in the longer term. Not only was it becoming increasingly difficult to coordinate the application of resources located in multiple organizations, there was also a serious negative impact on the ability of departments to provide their pre-pandemic services, maintain their budgets, and make progress on the priorities set out in the mandate established by all Members of the Legislative Assembly.

Over the past several months, we have also heard from residents, businesses and communities that they wanted improved pandemic communications, better enforcement, and a quicker turnaround from ProtectNWT.

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The COVID Secretariat is being established to ensure that the GNWT's pandemic response continues to be efficient, sustainable and responsive to northern needs. The Secretariat consolidates pandemic services that are already being delivered and provides a whole-of-government lens to their delivery. It will improve the clarity, accountability and consistency of our response, as well as our communications and engagement with NWT residents, businesses and communities.

The majority of the work that the Secretariat will be doing is not new - it will be responsible for administering pandemic-related programs and services that have been ongoing since the early days of the pandemic. These services include: ProtectNWT, the 811 call line, the Isolation Centres, Border Patrol, and Compliance and Enforcement, as well as the functions of the Emergency Management Organization that are directly related to COVID-19. The budget for the Secretariat is \$31.7 million for 2020/21.

The approach being taken by the GNWT in providing these services is not unique. The seven provinces and territories who have seen the most success at managing COVID-19 all offer services similar to ours. Services like isolation centres in Nunavut and Yukon, or border control, self-isolation planning, and 8-1-1 in the Atlantic Bubble.

The Secretariat will have a staff complement of 150 employees that is directly focused on responding to COVID-19. Most of these will be filled via one year transfer assignments for already redeployed staff. Only 10 positions of the 150 are newly created, and none of these are permanent. 131 of these staff will be frontline employees – answering phones, processing self-isolation plans and business requests, and staffing our borders and airports. The new resources are being added to support the operations and logistics components of the Secretariat – and ultimately improve services for businesses and residents alike.

Creating a core staff complement dedicated to pandemic response also gives clarity to employees and departments about the work before them: Departments can focus on undertaking their usual work activities and on delivering the mandate commitments they have been tasked with completing, while employees working in the Secretariat can give their work to respond to the pandemic the devoted attention it needs.

As program and service delivery is amalgamated in the Secretariat, one of the objectives will be to look for cost savings. In your letter, you suggest that the GNWT should re-examine the amount it spends on the isolation of individuals who leave the territory for non-essential travel, and spend more on rapid testing capabilities and contact tracing.

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These are all suggestions that are being explored by the COVID Secretariat in coordination with the Office of the Chief Public Health Officer, and I am hopeful that more efficient and effective ways to protect northerners, taking advantage of new technology, will be identified as a result. Along with operational and policy changes, the GNWT also continues to explore new and renewed funding relationships with our Federal counterparts.


There is no denying that the pandemic poses a financial burden to the NWT. Whether it's under a structure like the COVID Secretariat, or through ad hoc arrangements as we used before, the GNWT's response to the COVID-19 pandemic will cost real money – as have the responses of governments across Canada. By pulling together our pandemic activities under one structure, the GNWT will be better positioned to control costs, improve services, and find efficiencies. This is an investment in the health and safety of residents, in the stability of our territory, and in better services for businesses and residents.

In addition, with respect to your comments about the small business tax rate, I want to confirm that there is no intention to increase this.

The reality across the world is grim. COVID-19 numbers are rising globally, and Canada is experiencing daily increases that are cause for serious concern. But as other provinces are beginning to tighten up, the NWT is looking at continuing to move forward. Stability is the best thing for business and residents. It will allow us to continue to move forward, and reduce disruptions in people's lives.

I believe the COVID Secretariat will help us maintain our strong, gradual, deliberate path forward, and accelerate our economic and social response.

Sincerely,


Caroline Cochrane
Premier

- c. Principal Secretary
Ministers
Members of the Legislative Assembly