B.C. throne speech promises historic spending on housing and child care [1]

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EXCERPTS

Premier John Horgan's government is promising the largest investments in affordable housing and child care in British Columbia's history, as part of a throne speech Tuesday that offered a preview of next week's provincial budget but few details on the timeline, scope or cost of the relief for British Columbians.

"We begin this year by making a difference in the cost of child care for tens of thousands of families with the largest investment in child care in B.C. history," read the speech, delivered at the legislature by Lt.-Gov. Judith Guichon.

B.C. will begin by converting unlicensed spaces to regulated child care spots, as well as building new spaces as well. There were no details on the number of spaces or money allocated to the program.

The NDP government also appears to have dropped the slogan"$10-a-day child care," which the party campaigned heavily upon in the May 2017 election but which its power-sharing partners the B.C. Greens do not support.

The NDP promised during the election $10-a-day full-time childcare, $7-a-day part-time, and free childcare for low-income families, to be phased in over 10 years. The cost when fully operational was estimated at $1.5 billion a year, starting with children up to three years old.

Horgan told reporters that remains the goal, even without the slogan.

"That's our commitment, that's what we're going drive towards," he said.

"But it's also important you remember that the $10 a day label to drive the childcare plan was put together not by the NDP but by childcare providers, academics and providers. We've embraced it and are going to implement it."

Horgan said the plan has always been that "the first three years are the ramp-up period, where we're looking at toddler and infant care, we're creating more spaces, we're training more people. And those elements will be in the budget."

Tuesday's throne speech said: "Government will introduce new legislation to give parents vital information about unlawful or problem providers of unlicensed child care.

"These new rules will give families the information they need to make sure they are the best and safest choice for their child."

On housing, again the Horgan government promised a massive investment with few details.

“Starting this year, government will begin to make the largest investment in affordable housing in B.C.’s history, including social housing, student housing, seniors housing, indigenous housing and affordable rentals for middle-income families,” read the speech.

“Government will enact reforms to bring down barriers to affordable housing, and will work with partners to get them built.”

The NDP government will introduce “legislation to crack down on tax fraud, tax evasion and money laundering in B.C.’s real estate market,” read the speech.

The party campaigned on a two per cent speculation tax, which would generate an estimated $200 million a year for housing affordability projects including a plan to build 114,000 new units. The NDP also endorsed a plan by academics to raise property taxes and refund the money to those who pay income taxes in the province, thereby penalizing absentee owners and wealthy foreigners who purchase real estate but don’t contribute to the B.C. treasury.

The throne speech did not make clear the extent to which those specific promises will be translated into next week’s budget.

“Safe, decent housing is a right that is under threat by speculators, domestic and foreign, who seek windfall profits at the expense of people who work, live and pay taxes in B.C.,” read the speech.

“Your government believes that people seeking to profit from B.C.’s real estate must also contribute to housing solutions.”

Liberal opposition leader Andrew Wilkinson said the throne speech was an indication the NDP don’t intend to follow through with their election promises.

“This is a government that doesn’t have the stomach to govern because they made promises they cannot deliver on,” he said. “The throne speech is so completely lacking in substance that we are now concerned they are saving the rude surprises for the budget, where they are likely to raise taxes.”

Green leader Andrew Weaver expressed “cautious optimism” about the speech. His party’s power-sharing deal with the NDP gives Horgan the votes necessary to stay in power.

“We have some concerns about the lack of substance in terms of the depth of some of the arguments,” said Weaver. “There’s a lot of rhetoric and we’re looking forward to the gory details we’ll see emerge.”

The speech promised to “encourage” local governments on zoning and density along transit corridors, and create a new Housing Hub within B.C. Housing to reach out to service providing organizations in communities – faith-based groups and non-profits – to see if they have available land and a desire to build new units.

Renters, too, will get more protection, said the government.

New legislation will “introduce stronger protections for renters and owners of manufactured homes, and protections for renters facing eviction due to renovation or demolition,” read the speech.

The provincial government will also begin retrofits and renovations of social housing.

“Too many British Columbians are working paycheque to paycheque. Many cannot pay the bills without going further into debt”

Tuesday's throne speech recapped many of the promises the NDP government have already enacted, and was light on detail for new initiatives in the upcoming spring session.

The Horgan government resurrected its election pledge to replace the aging Pattullo Bridge within five years, saying it is "moving quickly" to come up with a plan before the bridge can no longer be used due to safety concerns.

Horgan said that extends to the Metro Vancouver mayor's 10-year transit plan. "I believe it's full speed ahead on those other initiatives," he said.

The speech did promise 2,900 new technology-related spaces at colleges and universities, a cross-ministry framework to meet the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and some sort of improvements to reduce health care surgical wait times and improve the living conditions of seniors.

On education, the government will follow through on its election promise to create a new playground capital fund, that would remove the pressure upon parents to fundraise for new equipment.

A long-promised poverty reduction strategy will also be introduced in 2018.

And the government will "review school funding to protect education in rural and northern communities" where many smaller schools have been threatened with closure due to the province's per-pupil funding formula, read the speech.

The NDP governments of Alberta and B.C. are currently fighting over a proposed B.C. regulation that could limit any increase of oil transportation through the province and stall the proposed twinning of the Kinder Morgan pipeline. In retaliation, Alberta banned the import of B.C. wine.

The throne speech did not repeat B.C.'s threat to temporarily restrict expanded shipments of bitumen through the province, pending a review. But it did reiterate the province's desire to further study the impact and clean-up of oil spills, while also going a step further to overhaul the environmental assessment process that allows for the approval or rejection of natural resource projects like mines and pipelines.

"This spring, government will work to revitalize B.C.'s environmental assessment process," read the speech. "Government will table terms of reference and engage industry, Indigenous Peoples, and communities in the coming months."

Tuesday's throne speech marks the beginning of what's expected to be a busy spring session for the Horgan government.

Finance Minister Carole James will deliver the party's first full provincial budget on Feb. 20, which will then be debated in detail in the legislature.

In addition to child care and housing, Horgan has said much of the session will focus on B.C.'s implementation of the federal legalization of marijuana, which will require the province to amend as many as 18 separate pieces of legislation.

B.C. announced this month it would allow the sale of marijuana through a mixed private-public model, paving the way for a network of stand-alone stores operated by the B.C. Liquor Distribution Branch.

Although the throne speech was vague on details about the child care plan, more information was found in the text of a new agreement between B.C. and Ottawa that will provide $153-million over three years in new federal child care funding.

The money sets aside specific amounts, targets, and spaces based on priority.

It offers an early glimpse at some aspects of the 10-year universal child care program. However, once B.C. adds its own funds in next week's budget, the scope of the program will expand dramatically and is expected to include savings for most British Columbians and not just low-income residents.

The federal money will allow B.C. to start this year reducing the cost of child care spaces for children up to three years old for families that earn under $51,000 a year.

"All families accessing these spaces would have significantly reduced fees and the most financially vulnerable families will receive the greatest benefit," reads the deal.

"For example, families earning up to $51,000 gross per year would have the lowest costs while those earning more than $51,000 gross per year would be able to access infant/toddler spaces at a significantly reduced cost, paying only approximately 20 per cent of median child care fees for group infant/toddler care in BC.

"While all families will have access, to ensure equitable access, approximately half of the spaces at each facility will be reserved for families earning up to $51,000 gross per year."

Ottawa's money includes $51 million this current 2017/18 fiscal year for early learning care, indigenous child care, children with special needs and young parent programs, which will create 1,370 licensed spaces. As well, there is $51 million in the upcoming 2018/19 year and $51 million the following year.

The federal dollars alone will help B.C. deliver free child care to at least 893 children, with reduced costs for at least 1,786 kids. There are only enough current licensed child care spaces in the province to accommodate 22 per cent of children aged zero to five in the province, with the median cost of a space more than $780 a month.

As well, B.C. will create bursaries for students seeking to train to become early childhood educators, and help them pay for travel, child care, books and other expenses.

B.C. will add in its own influx of cash in next week's provincial budget to stretch the program further. The NDP estimated during the election it would cost $280 million in the first year of the child care program, $400 million in 2019/20 and almost $1.5 billion by the time the program is fully operational within 10 years.

The first focus will be on children aged zero to three years, where the shortage of child care spaces is most acute, according to the agreement. That includes a specific focus on aboriginal communities, where families are more likely to face barriers to accessible child care and live in economically vulnerable situations.

"Given the high unmet need for infant/toddler care in B.C., the province will provide a one-time targeted intake to increase the physical number of licensed infant/toddler child care spaces," reads the deal.

That will come in the form of provincial grants to provide capital funding of up to $1 million per project to non-profit organizations, municipalities, universities, hospitals, colleges or schools to create new spaces.

"The capital grants for the infant/toddler programs will be provided on a cost-share basis for the creation of new infant/toddler child care spaces and will leverage other community funding, while contributing approximately 67 per cent of the actual capital costs," reads the agreement. "Organizations in receipt of the funding will be required to cover the remaining costs of the capital expenditure to create the spaces."

The grant money will be "prioritized for more vulnerable or underserved communities and aim to achieve a balance across urban and rural and different regions of the province."

B.C. will start in 2018/19 decreasing child care fees for infants and toddlers aged up to three years old.

"B.C. will test the introduction of universal child care by providing two years of increased operational support for new Early Care and Learning Prototype Sites, beginning with infant/toddler spaces," reads the deal. That operational funding will reduce the cost of the spaces.

"The operators that are selected for this funding will be representative across the province in both urban and rural settings so that the prototype centres can test the model in a representative range of communities in BC and will be prioritized for more vulnerable or underserved communities."

B.C. will also deliver a one-time funding boost to enhance training for early childhood educators, which will include expanded bursaries and a pilot program to help pay for expenses on training and substitute staff who need to attend courses.

The province will also direct new money, including federal dollars, into the Aboriginal Head Start programs, to implement full-day care in some communities.

For special needs children, B.C. is aiming to eliminate the current wait list within three years by adding $10 million in funding for 1,428 children, according to the deal.

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