

February 10, 2023

Ron McKinnon
Member of Parliament, Coquitlam – Port Coquitlam
3278 Westwood Street, Suite 101
Port Coquitlam BC V3C 3L8

Re: Tri-Cities Chamber of Commerce Priorities for Federal Budget 2023

Dear MP McKinnon,

Thank you for hosting a roundtable on January 19 with our Tri-Cities Chamber of Commerce leadership and members to consult on the upcoming Budget 2023. We discussed a wide range of issues and appreciated the open dialogue. In this letter I emphasize several of the priorities discussed, as well as raise others that were not brought forward due to time constraints.

Key Issues for Budget 2023

1. Workforce shortages

Canada is falling short in addressing the current and future skills needed across almost every sector. A multi-faceted approach must be taken to ensure the labour force shortage does not continue to hinder our economy. For Tri-Cities businesses to continue to grow and thrive, we need access to a skilled workforce. Immigration, temporary foreign workers, recognition of foreign credentials, post-graduate work permits for international students, reskilling and upskilling, affordable daycare, and employment for persons with disabilities can each play a role in the solution. Getting people back to work is another important factor. Regarding Employment Insurance, we also urge you to limit the financial obligation on employers, and that any changes to the program include maintaining ties to local unemployment rates, strengthening the 'available to work' requirement, and reaffirming that the core function of EI as insurance for *temporary* periods of unemployment.

2. Housing availability and affordability, and homelessness

All levels of government must work together to improve housing availability and affordability. This is closely connected to the labour market, as the workforce will not live within reach of available jobs if they cannot secure housing. Or, if this housing can't be built fast enough to keep pace with the jobs available or the influx of newcomers to our communities. We know you are keenly aware of this complex issue. However, one potential innovative piece of the solution that we would like to draw your attention to is the petition to bring forward a Community Land Trust tax policy. This policy looks to empower community land trusts across Canada by mimicking a proven model, the ecological gift program, which has unlocked almost \$1B in private equity for ecological preservation. The Community Land Trust initiative is spearheaded out of the Kamloops Chamber of Commerce, and supported by the Tri-Cities, BC, and Canadian Chambers of Commerce.

3. Support local companies first

We urge the government to choose home-grown companies while awarding contracts and making purchases. This investment also brings considerable economic spinoffs. With the rise in Shop Local campaigns, and online shopping outside of our country more enticing and convenient than ever, our tax dollars should be invested as much as possible here in Canada. Clearing the path for intraprovincial trade is also critical. In addition, supporting economic diversification, as well as providing local companies with the any federal certifications they may need in order to produce domestic goods should be done in an expedient manner. This has not been the case, for example, for Novo Textiles in Coquitlam, in limbo for nearly two years for Health Canada approval on their N95 mask production.

4. Supply chains, transportation, infrastructure

Over the past few years, rising global political unrest, the pandemic, and increasing climate change-related weather events have shown us the critical importance and vulnerabilities we have in our supply chains, transportation, and infrastructure. We know you are very aware of the needs on these fronts in order to protect Canadians. One project I will remind you of at this time, is our Chamber's support for the Vancouver Port Authority's Roberts Bank Terminal 2 project. In addition, our Chamber signed a joint letter with the Canadian Chamber of Commerce and 75 other business associations across the country, aimed at protecting Canada's essential supply chains and transportation services, and not supporting the proposed changes to labour laws in Bill C-302. While our Chamber respects and wants to protect the right to collective bargaining, the proposed legislation would ban using replacement workers during labour disputes, threatening to cause major disruptions to already-fragile supply chains. Though rarely used, replacement workers allow organizations in sectors like trucking, rail, ports, telecom, and air to continue collective bargaining while also maintaining a basic level of service that preserves critical services to Canadians.

5. National debt, fiscal prudence, efficiencies

As voiced in our meeting last month, we are concerned with the level of national debt and urge the government toward fiscal prudence, finding efficiencies, and lowering the debt for our future generations. Budget 2023 priorities should focus on an economic recovery built on a private sector driven economy and responsible financial management.

6. Lower credit card fees paid by businesses, particularly for SMEs

Perhaps less of a federal budget item, I do want to also take this opportunity to draw your attention to an issue that could make a significant difference for small business locally and across the country. There has been a steady increase in electronic payment methods, and businesses are paying more and more in merchant fees. While the interchange system is a vital service for businesses and consumers alike, the federal government can work with the payment processing industry to achieve reductions in interchange fees for merchants, as well as fair and transparent services to protect against fraud.

7. Overhaul Canadian tax system

We urge the federal government to position Canada as ‘open for business’ through competitive tax and regulatory policies. Chambers have been calling for a complete overhaul of Canadian tax system for years. A thriving private sector supports job growth and creates the tax base required to sustain health, education, and social programs across the country. As we like to say at our Chamber: Strong Business, Strong Communities.

The Tri-Cities Chamber of Commerce is the fastest growing in the province, now among the top five largest chambers and boards of trade in B.C. For more than 50 years we have served Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Port Moody, Anmore, and Belcarra, and now represent 1,100+ businesses from every sector. Our Chamber is an active member of the BC and Canadian Chambers of Commerce.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "L. Courchesne", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Leslie Courchesne
Chief Executive Officer