

Historic budget day in Tobago

First woman Finance Secretary to make Assembly presentation

TOBAGO

■ Elizabeth Williams

FOCUSED, humbled, yet confident. This was how Finance Secretary Petal-Ann Roberts described her feelings about her historic delivery of the Tobago House of Assembly (THA) budget today at 10 a.m. at the Assembly Legislature building, in Scarborough as the first woman Finance Secretary.

When the *Express* spoke with her yesterday, she was in the process of fine-tuning her budget statement.

'I feel humbled by this experience in life at a time like this. I feel a sense of confidence because I do know what I am saying and I do know what I want for Tobago. I think this budget would be very pivotal and I hope that the people of Tobago embraces the plans that we have for Tobago especially in this budget,' Roberts said.

The Finance Secretary said, following her meeting with Finance Minister Davendranath Tancoo, she expects a basic 5.1% of the national budget. 'I did indicate to the minister the bases of the 5.1% and he did agree ... I cannot say if he would go by the percentage that I am asking for but really and truly the minimum percentage that we are saying, that we are not going beneath, we are only accepting the minimum of 5.1%,' she said.

She reported that focal areas of the budget include tourism and the creative sector, agriculture, digitisation the use of digital technology, human capital development and focus on the micro, small and medium enterprise sector.

'We do have some very critical areas as well across the Assembly but these are the drivers the areas that can drive the transformation we want to see in the economy,' she explained.

As for the additional monies allocated to the THA during the midyear review of the budget, the Finance Secretary said she expected more. 'When we spoke I did ask about the SFC (Standing Finance Committee) payment and if that was necessary because I know that was coming the \$32 million that was a release that we would get. He (the Finance Minister) did indicate because of where they are in the process of paying the arrears they could not stall it, they could not stop, they had to go ahead and make those payments,' she said.

She continued: 'I do look forward though to receiving that funding from the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF) for the coastal restoration because that is also important for us. But more important for me right now is to utilise the balance of resources ... and that's what we have been doing for many, many years. We have been utilising the limited resources to see the most that we can get out of it. We have always been doing more with less.'

During debate on the mid-year review last week, Tancoo accused former finance minister Colm Imbert of deliberately delaying the signing of a \$134 million loan with the Caribbean Bank of Latin America (CAF) for coastal protection in Tobago 'through vindictiveness and wickedness'. Roberts said yesterday once there are no interruptions in the reading of the budget, the presentation would be less than three hours.

Last June the THA presented a \$3.956 billion budget. Last September the THA received \$2.599 billion.