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**PRESS RELEASE**

**Statement by the Hon Roy McTaggart, Leader of the Opposition, on the changes to the COVID-19 Protocols and continuing impact of rising Cost of Living.**

**June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

My fellow Caymanians and Residents.

Last Friday evening, the Government's Information Services issued a notice of updates to the COVID-19 regulations that are set to begin on June 30th. The initial announcement was made by publishing the changes in the official gazette. The Government has not indicated whether other changes would follow and, if so, when.

Nonetheless, my Opposition colleagues and I welcome the changes to the COVID-19 rules.

The changes agreed on Friday by the Cabinet, in summary, are:

Firstly, to make mask mandates voluntary except where the owner or operator of a restaurant or bar decides to require the wearing of a mask by their customers or staff. However, masks will continue to be mandatory in health care facilities, residential home care facilities, and at the prison or places of detention.

Secondly, there will no longer be a need for anyone travelling to the Cayman Islands to have a negative pre-arrival COVID-19 test.



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These changes are a reasonable first step to removing the restrictions on those living in our Islands while also improving the ease for visitors to travel here and help regrow the tourism sector.

Like many places, the Cayman Islands will continue to disallow unvaccinated tourists, other than unvaccinated children, from travelling to our Islands. As more countries begin to allow entry to unvaccinated travellers, particularly within the North American market, we will also need to revisit this. Tourism cannot return to 'normal' levels without us accepting unvaccinated tourists. I do hope that Government will provide all of us with their plans or thinking, including a potential timeline, for removing the remaining restrictions.

Importantly, as we continue to remove restrictions, the Government must also seriously redouble its efforts to get boosters in the arms of those who have not yet received them. We have almost 92% of the population fully vaccinated, but only 36% with a booster. And so, I repeat, Government must do much more to encourage those already vaccinated to get a booster and to make it easy to obtain.

I was also happy that the Government has listened to the Opposition in our call to continue the 'pension holiday'. On several occasions in recent weeks, I told the Government that continuing the pension holiday helps all families immediately. Families who are still feeling the hardship caused by the pandemic and those now also facing ever increasing prices at the stores and the gas pump as the cost-of-living crisis starts to bite even harder.

I had said that the pension holiday would be needed for at least the next six months – the Government has decided to continue it for three months. I suspect that



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in the end, it will be continued to at least the end of the year. But I congratulate them on their willingness to listen to us and the small businesses and families still suffering from a slow tourism sector as well as from rising prices.

But this measure will not be enough, and I again appeal to the Government to put in place the other measures we have called for, namely:

- advise the Government-owned Water Authority not to increase water rates for at least six months.
- speak with Executives at Cayman Water and persuade them to do likewise.
- discuss with CUC the possibility to minimise increases in electricity costs to families and businesses.
- remove the import duty on gasoline and diesel for six months and ensure gas stations pass on the savings.
- continue the Covid tourism stipends.
- increase the stipend to retired seamen, veterans, and those entirely dependent on financial assistance from Government, including those civil service pensioners with pensions below what is provided to individuals receiving social assistance. These are some of the most vulnerable in our communities and will need the help to ensure they can keep their head above water financially.

There may be other ideas that the Civil Service may suggest that could ease the burden of what I have called a “cost-of-living crisis” like none we have seen before. I have said before, this cost-of-living crisis is not caused by the Government. Still, the Government must do what it can to help ease the burden that everyday people are



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facing. Individually, none of these recommendations will solve the problem – but collectively, they can help our people survive what is still an unknown storm.

The Government has recently fully drawn down on the US\$400M emergency line of credit that the last Government put in place. That line of credit was intended to be used for just such a situation. In addition, the Government recently announced record government revenues of about \$447M in the first three months of the year.

\*And over the weekend a further announcement indicates that for the first five months of this year the Government's entire public sector has a surplus of about \$180 million, or \$30 million more than they had planned for. This includes an increase in import duty of almost \$13.5 million when compared to May 2021. The fact is that as prices of goods rise the Government is earning additional revenues from these higher prices. It cannot be right that Government benefits from the rising prices while the people suffer.

So, funding the relief measures I have recommended should not be an issue.

Premier Panton, we need to help our people get through the rest of this year.

Please listen and act.

May God continue to bless our beloved Cayman Islands and its people.

(\* From Loop Cayman: <https://cayman.loopnews.com/content/government-makes-30-million-more-projected-year-date>)

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