

Finance Minister Graham Steele
Back to Balance – Year 3 Launch
November 21, 2011

When we came into office, we were facing a \$1.4 billion deficit within three years, if nothing changed.

We all recognized that we had to get the province's books to balance. But we also recognized that there's more than one way back to balance.

That's why public engagement has been such an essential part of our financial plan.

Over the past two years, I have undertaken the most extensive financial consultations in the province's history. I believe deeply in the collective wisdom of Nova Scotians, and I needed to find new ways of listening to find where the consensus lay.

I'm proud of that. The "Back to Balance" tours have been the most rewarding and energizing experience of my 10+ years in elected office.

The results of those tours have formed the backbone of our last two budgets, and of the four-year Back to Balance plan itself.

And yet no matter how many meetings I held, no matter how many communities I visited, no matter what day of the week or time of day we set, I was always conscious of the fact that there would always be people who'd like to participate but couldn't, whether because of distance, or because of family or work or other obligations.

We really thought hard about how to make it as easy as possible, for as many people as possible, to get informed and have their say.

And now I think we've done it.

We've created an online budget tool that will allow Nova Scotians – wherever they live, whatever day of the week or time of day works for them, in groups, as families or as individuals – to work with the provincial budget and tell their government about their choices to get us get back to balance.

Nous avons créé un outil en ligne qui permettra aux Néo-Écossais de réaménager le budget provincial et de soumettre au gouvernement leurs suggestions sur la façon de rétablir l'équilibre.

Call it crowd-sourcing, call it the collective wisdom of the people, call it the democratization of the budget process – it's new, it's innovative, and it's now available.

The website is backtobalance.ca and it's live now.

The users that have helped us out with testing have come back to us really keen on what they see. It's user-friendly, it's informative, it's challenging, it's cool.

This online budget tool is the centrepiece of this year's pre-budget consultation process. We will compile the results, and if the tool works as well as we think it will, the results will be very influential in the creation of next year's budget.

We're going even a step further, and making the source code available to any developer who thinks they can take this tool and make it even better. That's pretty new for government too.

There are other elements to the pre-budget consultation.

You've already heard about the Online Citizens' Forum. This is one more innovative way for our government to engage people in the decision-making process. We're signing people up now, and Forum participants will have the chance to deal with some budget-related issues.

I will also be doing the more traditional speaking tour around the province, mostly in January and February. The details are being worked out now.

I'll also be meeting with a variety of organizations and associations to seek their views on the upcoming budget. Those meetings have already started.

Members of the government caucus will be doing similar speeches and consultations in their own constituencies and regions.

This year, we want to reach out to groups that are interested in the budget-making process but perhaps haven't traditionally been part of these tours. That's why we're opening the door to receiving invitations from groups of 20 or more people who would like to invite me to a dialogue on the upcoming budget.

There are a few conditions, the main one being that the group has to have worked through the online budget tool in advance of the meeting, and submitted it to me, and the focus of the meeting has to be a discussion of the choices the group has made.

I hope this process will open the door to groups and people who maybe haven't been part of the more traditional pre-budget tours carried out before.

This year's pre-budget consultation plan is innovative and ambitious. If it works – and I really think it will – it will set a new standard for public engagement in provincial budget-making.

Le plan de consultation pré-budgétaire de cette année est innovateur et ambitieux. Si le plan est fructueux – et je crois vraiment qu'il le sera – une nouvelle norme sera établie en ce qui a trait à la participation du public dans l'établissement du budget provincial.