



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Alberta's Economic Future

Ministry of Arts, Culture and Status of Women
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 19, 2025
10:15 a.m.

Transcript No. 31-1-18

**Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 31st Legislature
First Session**

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Getson, Shane C., Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland (UC), Chair
Loyola, Rodrigo, Edmonton-Ellerslie (NDP), Deputy Chair
Eggen, David, Edmonton-North West (NDP),* Acting Deputy Chair

Boparai, Parmeet Singh, Calgary-Falconridge (NDP)
Ceci, Hon. Joe, ECA, Calgary-Buffalo (NDP)**
Cyr, Scott J., Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul (UC)
de Jonge, Chantelle, Chestermere-Strathmore (UC)
Elmeligi, Sarah, Banff-Kananaskis (NDP)
Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP)***
Hayter, Julia K.U., Calgary-Edgemont (NDP)****
Hoyle, Rhiannon, Edmonton-South (NDP)
Stephan, Jason, Red Deer-South (UC)
van Dijken, Glenn, Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock (UC)
Wright, Justin, Cypress-Medicine Hat (UC)

* substitution for Rodrigo Loyola

** substitution for Sarah Elmeligi

*** substitution for Rhiannon Hoyle

**** substitution for Parmeet Boparai

Also in Attendance

Deol, Jasvir, Edmonton-Meadows (NDP)
Wiebe, Ron, Grande Prairie-Wapiti (UC)

Support Staff

Shannon Dean, KC	Clerk
Trafton Koenig	Law Clerk
Philip Massolin	Clerk Assistant and Executive Director of Parliamentary Services
Nancy Robert	Clerk of <i>Journals</i> and Committees
Abdul Bhurgri	Research Officer
Rachel McGraw	Research Officer
Warren Huffman	Committee Clerk
Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
Aaron Roth	Committee Clerk
Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications
Christina Steenbergen	Supervisor of Communications Services
Amanda LeBlanc	Managing Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Participant

Ministry of Arts, Culture and Status of Women
Hon. Tanya Fir, Minister

10:15 a.m.

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

[Mr. Getson in the chair]

**Ministry of Arts, Culture and Status of Women
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Well, good morning, everyone. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Status of Women for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2026.

I'd like to ask that we go around the table and have the members introduce themselves to the record. Minister, introduce yourself first and then the folks you have joining you at the table. Then, for everyone's edification, *Hansard* is running the microphones, so we don't have to be jumping for the buttons on that. To get things started, I'll kick it off with my introduction as chair of the committee here today. MLA Shane Getson from Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland, better known as God's country. We'll turn it over to my colleague to my right.

Mr. Wright: Justin Wright, MLA for the charming constituency of Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Ms de Jonge: Chantelle de Jonge, MLA for Chestermere-Strathmore.

Mr. Wiebe: Good morning, everyone. Ron Wiebe, MLA, Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Cyr: Scott Cyr, MLA, Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Mr. Stephan: Jason Stephan, MLA, Red Deer-South.

Ms Fir: Tanya Fir, Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women and MLA for Calgary-Peigan. With me is my deputy minister, Kim Capstick; assistant deputy minister for status of women and creative and community development, Nilam Jetha; assistant deputy minister for heritage, David Link; and Jeff Dumont, assistant deputy minister of financial services and our senior financial officer.

Mr. Deol: Good morning, everyone. Jasvir Deol, MLA, Edmonton-Meadows. Thank you.

Member Ceci: Joe Ceci, Calgary-Buffalo, MLA.

Mr. Eggen: Good morning. My name is David Eggen. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-North West.

Ms Goehring: Good morning. Welcome, everyone. My name is Nicole Goehring. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Hayter: Good morning. I'm Julia Hayter. I'm the MLA for Calgary-Edgemont.

The Chair: Perfect. I won't introduce the clerk to my left here, but he'll be the guy you need to e-mail, raise your hand to. He does all the technical things and runs the shot clock.

I'd also like to note the following substitutions for the record. We have hon. Mr. Eggen for Member Loyola as deputy chair, hon. Member Ceci for Member – I'm always going to mess her name up. I'm so sorry.

Ms Goehring: Eremenko?

The Chair: Her, too.

Ms Goehring: Oh, Elmeligi.

The Chair: Elmeligi. Okay. I have it once right on the record. I'm going to owe that member a number of items for apologies.

Ms Goehring for Member Hoyle and Ms Hayter for Member Boparai.

As I mentioned earlier here, *Hansard* is running the operations for us. The committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Assembly TV online. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of the meetings can be accessed through the Legislative Assembly website.

We don't have any members joining us remotely, so if anyone does come on, we'll tell them how to proceed accordingly. We would probably stop at a point naturally so they could introduce themselves to the table. Similarly, if we have any members joining us that haven't introduced themselves, we would find a point when they could do that as well. I would ask that you set your devices to the least disturbing mode possible.

If you need to be put on the speaker's list, remote would be through the clerk here. In person, just catch the chair's attention, and I'll throw you on a list off to the side here for that.

Speaking rotation and time limits. The main estimates of the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Status of Women shall be considered for two hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(7), for those following along, sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table. For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and member speaking agree. If debate is exhausted prior to two hours, the ministry estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please e-mail or message through the clerk, the gentleman sitting to my left here.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone in the gallery and are asked to introduce themselves to the record prior to commenting. The podium over there would be available for that.

Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority sitting at all times. So far so good? No issues with the speaking.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused; however, the block of the speaking time and the overall two-hour time will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

Finally, a couple of housekeeping items here as well. Committee members should have the opportunity to hear both questions and the answers without interruption during the estimates debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between the member and the minister.

The other thing that we found that works out really well: if you keep your questions and your answers kind of relevant to the documents at hand – Fiscal Plan: Meeting the Challenge, strategic plan, ministry business plans, general estimates – things just work

out really well. Then the other one I would note is that we've had pretty good success in the meetings; I'd ask the same thing here today. We do a lot of really interesting work in the House. We run this one more like a business meeting. It helps to keep decorum going, and then we're not wasting time on the overall points of order. We just keep the questions going through the chair and that flow. If that works for everybody, that would be greatly appreciated.

I would now invite the Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women to begin with your opening remarks. Minister, the floor is yours for 10 minutes.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Chair, and good morning, colleagues. I'm happy to be here to discuss the 2025 budget estimates and business plan for the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Status of Women. I've introduced my team that's at the table with me today. I know that many of you have heard me say this before, but I must start by saying what an incredible honour it is to serve as Alberta's Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women. I'm very proud of all the work this ministry does on behalf of Albertans, and I'm privileged to have the opportunity to meet with so many artists, creators, storytellers, and leaders across our province that work hard each and every day to ensure that our arts, culture, heritage, and community programs continue to grow and thrive.

For those unfamiliar with my ministry, we have a vast portfolio of programs and services. We champion and support the nonprofit community. We bring Albertan perspectives and talent to the world stage. We support and profile Alberta art and artists through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. We tell Alberta's story at our 21 provincial museums and historic sites, including the Royal Alberta Museum, the RAM, here in Edmonton; the Royal Tyrrell in Drumheller; our Provincial Archives; and our two Jubilee auditoria.

We ensure our growing francophone community has access to the French language services they need, supported by our Advisory Council on the Francophonie. We work tirelessly to address gender-based violence in our province and help women take up their rightful place as drivers of our economy and so much more. Mr. Chair, through Budget 2025 Alberta's government is maintaining funding for the arts, culture, and heritage programs that help continue to make Alberta the best place in Canada to live, work, and raise a family. Allow me to share some of the highlights.

Having just marked International Women's Day a few weeks ago, I know you'll all agree when I say that women are a critical part of shaping the long-term success of our province. With a budget of \$19.8 million the status of women branch continues empowering women to pursue careers and education in trades, STEM, and other fields where they have been historically underrepresented, which is why my ministry continues to support scholarship programs like the women in STEM and Persons Case scholarships. It's also why we launched the new women in technical and applied arts scholarship last year, the first and only scholarship of its kind nationally, so that women in Alberta are empowered to pursue their education and career goals.

You can learn about all these opportunities on the Women's Hub on alberta.ca, our centralized online resource for information to help women navigate the workforce, stay healthy, stay safe, and participate meaningfully in our communities. This past fall my ministry also launched an online resource hub to provide information on government services and supports available to 2SLGBTQIA-plus individuals.

Our team is also working with partners from across government to develop a 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence in Alberta. This is a priority for me and is vital for the future of our

province. I look forward to launching this pivotal strategy soon and continuing the invaluable work that will come from it.

Speaking of such invaluable work, Budget 2025 also continues our work supporting a strong nonprofit sector in Alberta. Mr. Chair, I know that every member here can share examples of the amazing work being done by the more than 27,000 nonprofit organizations in Alberta. Budget 2025 continues to support these groups with \$92.5 million in grants and other supports.

10:25

Our investment includes maintaining \$50 million for the community facility enhancement program, or CFEP program, as part of the three-year funding commitment made in 2023. Each year CFEP supports hundreds of community capital projects, building and expanding playgrounds, community halls, art centres, and recreation and sports facilities, creating jobs and supporting local organizations.

We are also investing \$14 million in the community initiatives program, or CIP program, which supports nonprofits to offer programming, host community events, and expand services that help Albertans. Many of the organizations that receive these grants are run by volunteers contributing their time and talents to causes important to them. Volunteers play an essential role in our communities, Mr. Chair, which is why our business plan includes developing a plan to increase volunteerism across the province in partnership with our nonprofit sector.

In addition to CFEP, we are also continuing to invest in cultural capital projects, including Telus Spark in Calgary, the Arts Commons and Olympic Plaza transformation project in Calgary, and the Winspear Centre in Edmonton. I am happy to say that we added another project to that list with a \$40 million conditional commitment over four years, starting in 2026, for the Centennial Planetarium transformation project at Contemporary Calgary. This funding will help Contemporary Calgary transform into a cultural landmark, bringing art to more Albertans and further enhancing arts accessibility in our province. The arts are an integral part of who we are as a province and how we tell our story.

I'm incredibly proud that Alberta's government is keeping our commitment to increase funding for the arts, including a \$4.5 million increase this year to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, the AFA, followed by similar increases in 2026-27 and 2027-28. This steady, incremental investment will see record-level arts investment of more than \$43 million annually by 2027.

Mr. Chair, our increased support has already allowed the AFA to increase support for Alberta artists, and I assure you that the 2025 increase will go a long way in also increasing support for our arts organizations. The AFA board is working hard to give more Albertans a chance to enjoy our spectacular provincial art collection first-hand.

Just as the arts in Alberta are growing, so are our cultural industries, especially our film and television sector. We are continuing to make sure that producers globally know about the competitive financial incentives, breathtaking locations, world-class studios, and exceptional crews here in Alberta. Budget 2025 continues the momentum in this area with \$8 million for the Alberta media fund, further diversifying our economy, creating jobs, and sharing our culture, perspective, and stories around the world. This ensures our local film and television as well as publishing and music sectors continue growing.

Mr. Chair, our music sector in particular is poised for growth. We are working with the sector, including Alberta Music and West Anthem, to finalize an Alberta music action plan, which I look forward to sharing later this year.

My ministry also prioritizes telling our province's stories at Alberta's world-class provincial museums and heritage sites. The Royal Tyrrell Museum welcomed over half a million visitors last year and will be celebrating its 40th anniversary this fall. The Royal Alberta Museum is preparing to host a new feature exhibition, *Orcas: Our Shared Future*, set to run from May to October, after the enormous success of *Angkor: The Lost Empire of Cambodia*. I am encouraged at Alberta's appetite for cultural and historical discovery, and to continue encouraging Albertans and visitors to visit our government-owned heritage facilities and to support our other heritage programs, Budget 2025 invests \$51 million to our heritage division.

Before I close, Mr. Chair, I would also like to wish everyone a happy Alberta Francophonie Month. Les Albertains et les Albertaines francophones ont toujours été essentiel à l'histoire de l'Alberta. C'est pourquoi je suis ravi de reconnaître un autre Mois de la Francophonie en Alberta. Joyeux Mois de la Francophonie.

I had the honour of launching our Francophonie Month celebrations at a flag-raising ceremony outside this very building recently. I hope you all take time this month to celebrate French-speaking communities across our beautiful province. Budget 2025 recognizes their impact, too, maintaining over \$4 million in funding for the Francophone Secretariat.

Mr. Chair, this has been just a small snapshot of how the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Status of Women is investing in Alberta's arts, culture, heritage, and nonprofit sectors to ensure continued economic growth and enrich the lives of Albertans. From fossils to festivals, from book publishing to award-winning screen productions, our investment grants and programs are bringing direct, tangible benefits to our province and Alberta families. We proudly tell Alberta's story and ensure the place that we all are so proud to call home continues to be the best place to live, work, and raise a family.

Thank you. I am happy to take questions.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Minister.

We'll just set the timing. The first 50-minute block goes to the opposition on this side. It can be no longer than 10 minutes for speaking at a time. Default time is 10 minutes for maximum speaking time, and the request to combine time is revisited with each member. Also, in here you can cede your time to one of your colleagues if you need to within this section. Is everyone good with the rules for this segment? Okay. Perfect.

Who's up? MLA Hayter. Over to you.

Ms Hayter: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's a pleasure for me to be here with our team at the Arts, Culture and Status of Women estimates. Thank you, Minister, for taking the time today to answer our questions, and also thank you to your staff for being available in all the work that you do to serve Albertans.

The Chair: I hate to interrupt. We just need to let the clerk know if you guys are looking for combined or block time.

Ms Hayter: I'm good with block.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms Hayter: Before I begin, I just also would like to recognize and wish everyone a happy Francophone month as well as recognize that we are in Treaty 6 territory, an important territory to the Métis people of Alberta.

I'm going to jump right into it. Looking at page 54 of the Arts, Culture and Status of Women estimates, I noticed that while the status of women budget shows \$19.78 million for '25-26, the '24 to

'25 forecast shows only \$8.02 million was actually spent. That's less than the budgeted amount. Isn't this massive underspend a clear indication that the government isn't truly committed to the status of women initiatives? Why should Alberta women believe that this government is serious about taking gender equality seriously when they consistently fail to utilize the funds allocated for this purpose?

Also, in the business plan page 28 vaguely mentions increasing women's participation in Alberta's economy, but when we look at page 29, women's enrolment in STEM programs barely moved, from 14 per cent to 15 per cent, over the four years. Meanwhile we've got allocated just \$225,000 for all scholarship programs combined. That's a minimal amount that works out to fewer than 100 scholarships if they're each \$2,500. I'm wondering, through the chair: can the minister claim that the government is serious about women's economic advancement when we're investing in it a kind of minuscule amount in helping women enter historically underrepresented fields?

I've reviewed the entire business plan and estimates document, and I notice a glaring absence of concrete targets for improving women's economic status, reducing the gender wage gap, or increasing representation in leadership positions. I'm wondering: why does the ministry lack specific, measurable targets for improving women's economic status? Without these clear benchmarks, how can Albertans hold this government accountable for actual progress on gender equality rather than just rhetoric?

On page 54 of the estimates I see that this ministry has made cuts to the community initiatives program. We've gone from \$16.025 million to \$14.025 million. These programs often are benefiting women and families. Meanwhile Budget 2025 has overlooked increasing support for women facing economic hardship. I'm wondering why this government is not prioritizing investment in programs that would help women achieve economic security.

Budget 2025 fiscal plan mentions economic growth and diversification, but it fails to address the structural barriers that keep women from fully participating in Alberta's economy. The business plan shows no specific initiatives to address pay transparency or workplace discrimination. Through you, Chair, to the minister: with women still earning less than men in virtually every sector of Alberta's economy, why does the ministry's business plan lack substantial programs to address these structural barriers? Is this government committed to maintaining the status quo where women earn less and face more barriers to advancement?

10:35

Through you, Mr. Chair, there is no specific mention in the business plan of targeted support for women entrepreneurs despite evidence that women business owners face greater barriers accessing capital and growing their business. So, through the chair, I'd like to ask: what specific programs, if any, does status of women have to support women entrepreneurs? How much of the status of women budget is allocated to supporting women's entrepreneurship? What targets, if any, does the ministry have for increasing the number of women-owned businesses in Alberta? What co-ordination exists between the status of women and economic development agencies to support women entrepreneurs? Has the ministry studied the specific barriers facing women entrepreneurs in Alberta's economy?

The business plan as well lacks any mention of addressing gender-based pay disparities despite this being a persistent issue across virtually all sectors of Alberta's economy. Through the chair, again I'd like to ask the minister: does the ministry track pay disparities by gender across different sectors in Alberta? What specific initiatives, if any, is the ministry undertaking to address the gender wage gap? Has the ministry considered measures such as

pay transparency legislation that other jurisdictions have implemented? What analysis has been done on how women pay gaps affect provincial tax revenue and economic growth? What targets, if any, does the ministry have for reducing gender-based disparities over the next three years?

You know, through the chair again, I'd like to ask about the fragmented approach to funding women's services across the government. If we're looking at Budget 2025, I notice that despite having a dedicated status of women portfolio, critical programs that directly affect women are scattered across multiple ministries. On page 78 of the fiscal plan we see that Children and Family Services has funding allocated over three years for women's shelters. But then on page 81 support for victims of domestic violence appears to be under Public Safety and Emergency Services through the victims of crime funding, and then in the Seniors, Community and Social Services budget there's funding for housing and homelessness programs that disproportionately impact women. Through the chair, I'd like to know: why is funding for programs that primarily serve women spread across so many different ministries rather than being consolidated under status of women? How does this fragmented approach affect the government's ability to develop a cohesive strategy on women's issues?

What specific funding and programs related to women's services actually fall under the status of women's \$19.78 million budget? How much co-ordination exists between the status of women and the other ministries that administer these programs? Would women in Alberta be better served if these programs were consolidated under the status of women with a comprehensive budget and mandate?

Is status of women primarily, unfortunately, a symbolic office with limited real authority given that most of the substantial programming for women appears to be held elsewhere? Through the chair, this fragmented approach creates concerns about accountability, effectiveness, and whether the status of women has any meaningful role beyond a symbolic gesture. It also raises the question about the government's commitment to a co-ordinated approach to addressing women's issues.

Through you again to the chair – sorry; I'm talking too much – I'd like to draw attention to what actually also appears to be a planned decimation of the status of women budget in 2027 to 2028. Looking at page 31 of the Arts, Culture and Status of Women business plan, we can see the funding for the status of women is \$19.78 million in 2025 to 2026, a cut from last year. It's then going to be stable at \$19.8 million in '26-27. Then it dramatically gets a cut to only \$4.13 million in 2027 to 2028. This represents a staggering 79 per cent reduction in status of women funding in just one year. I'd like to ask: why is the ministry planning to slash status of women funding by 79 per cent in 2027 to 2028? What specific programs and services for women will be eliminated to achieve this drastic cut?

Does this massive reduction indicate the government's plan to effectively dismantle the status of women portfolio after the next election? How can women in Alberta have confidence that this government is committed to gender equality when they're planning a 79 per cent cut to these services in the near future? What gender-based analysis, if any, was conducted to assist the impact of this dramatic reduction? Which specific initiatives from the 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence will be abandoned to accommodate this cut? This is not a minor adjustment. A 79 per cent reduction represents a virtual dismantling of the status of women programming, and this raises serious questions about whether the status of women mandate is being set up for elimination.

Through you, Chair, I would like to ask the minister about women's health care research initiatives through her mandate as the recent Alberta Women's Health Foundation survey revealed some striking statistics: 92 per cent of survey respondents identified as women, 47 per cent reported facing barriers when accessing contraception, 16 per cent identified cost as a significant barrier to contraceptive access, 14 per cent reported lack of access to a primary care provider as a challenge, and 24.6 per cent of Albertans currently do not have a family physician. Given these findings I was hoping that the ministry could give me the specific steps to what they're doing to improve women's health care research funding, address gaps in contraception access, support comprehensive women's health studies, enhance primary care provider availability for women's health services.

Could the minister outline the government's current strategy for addressing these critical health research and access challenges for women in Alberta? Why does the minister responsible for status of women have no substantive health-related programming or initiatives for women in its current business plan? Despite being the very ministry tasked with advocating for women's interests, there is a conspicuous absence of meaningful health-focused strategies or priorities. How can dedicated women's status . . .

The Chair: Well done, Member. There was a lot there to unpack.

Best of luck to the minister to do that. You have up to 10 minutes to respond. It's a good thing we have 50 minutes here. Minister, over to you.

Ms Fir: Well, thank you very much to the member for those questions. The status of women change – I'll speak more about this – reflects transfers to other ministries to fund gender-based violence programs. I'll speak more to that.

With respect to increasing women's economic participation, as I alluded to in my opening comments, women have always made crucial contributions to Alberta's economy. Our government is investing in important programs, training, and scholarships to help women continue that critical contribution and secure fulfilling, high-paying careers in every sector of our province. Our government is proud to partner with and invest in amazing organizations like Women Building Futures and Elevate Aviation.

I spoke about it in my opening comments, but I want to reiterate again about some of the scholarship programs we have. Last year we awarded \$225,000 in scholarships to 90 students through the women in STEM scholarship and Persons Case scholarship, you know, creating amazing opportunities for students to study in fields where their gender is underrepresented. Plus, as I mentioned in my opening comments – we're proud of this, and I want to reiterate it – we launched the new women in technical and applied arts scholarship, the first and only provincially funded scholarship of its kind in Canada, to help women train for careers in industries like film, television, music. We are also, as I mentioned in my opening comments, developing our 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence, which will include actions to empower women to be economically independent. I will come back to that.

With respect to the member having questions around the community initiatives program reduction, our community grant programs improve the quality of life for Albertans, create jobs, and stimulate local investment. The CIP program, in particular, supports amazing initiatives and events in every corner of the province. The budget change reflects the completion of a one-time four-year program called the creative partnerships Alberta program. This program, which had a budget of \$2.3 million a year, funded several partnerships, including working with Innovate Calgary on the UCEED social impact fund, the United Way for Calgary, and

Flourish Alberta. And while the community initiatives program sees a slight reduction in Budget 2025, funding for the nonprofit sector increases in other areas such as the arts alongside significant investments in cultural infrastructure projects, including maintaining record-high funding levels for the community facility enhancement, or CFEP, program. We're also continuing to support Crowdfunding Alberta, which is a safe and easy way for nonprofit organizers and donors to come together to earn matching grants to support fundraising efforts. Our government matches that up to \$5,000 for eligible organizations.

10:45

Going back and forth between women's economic empowerment and our 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence, women's economic empowerment will be a key part of the 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence. I'm looking forward to sharing the actions we plan to take when that strategy is released very soon. There was engagement with over 500 stakeholders in creating that strategy in 11 communities across the province, and it will be the most comprehensive strategy of its kind in all of Canada.

There are many ministries – the member had mentioned about women's funding being scattered or fragmented throughout various ministries. Every single ministry cares about and funds women, and it's related to every single woman and those ministries that have the expertise and knowledge to deal with the issues, whether it's crime and safety under the minister of public safety or whether it's health-related matters or whether it's Children and Family Services. Of course, that funding resides in the ministry that has the expertise and skill set to deal with it. We're proud that we have millions and millions of dollars that we spend annually on women's programs.

The beauty – maybe that's not the best word. What will be amazing about the 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence once it's released is that it will be, as I said, the most comprehensive of its kind. It will ensure there's a co-ordinated approach. It will be overarching. It will identify duplications in funding, gaps in funding, focus on identifying root causes and breaking the cycle. It will be an amazing pairing between the incredible work each individual ministry does for the safety and economic empowerment of women while also ensuring that we have an overarching approach that will have immediate actions, short-term actions, long-term actions. I wish I, you know, could say more about it. Of course, once it's released, I look forward to all members reading it.

Again, there are many ministries that have programs related to women's gender-based violence, and my ministry works closely with all of our partners across government to co-ordinate that programming for women.

To the member's point about the status of women, the budget drop there, Budget 2025 invests, as I just finished saying, millions in support for survivors to end gender-based violence, including \$19.8 million within our Ministry of Arts, Culture and Status of Women, to support, again, the 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence, which is expected to be released later this year. The drop in funding reflects the end of the federally committed funding. In July of 2023 we signed a four-year agreement with the federal government for \$54 million, and again, the drop in funding simply reflects the end of the federally committed funding. The millions of dollars that our government spends across all ministries annually will continue.

I would like to touch on some of the member's questions and comments around women's health research, reproductive health care products. Our government envisions a future where women's health care receives the attention and resources it deserves, significantly impacting the well-being of women in Alberta. As an example, last year we committed a total of \$20 million to Alberta

Women's Health Foundation and the Calgary Health Foundation. This funding will support research on cervical cancer, heart disease, and other women's health matters along with recruiting top researchers to the province and supporting advocacy and awareness efforts. This funding will also address critical gaps in women's health care, improve clinical care, enhance education and training, and drive innovative research. Improving access to health care and funding groundbreaking research and initiatives focused on the unique health needs of women will improve health care outcomes for families today and into the future.

I also want to touch on some of the other questions and comments from the member. Our government supports protecting choice for women accessing reproductive health care products and services in Alberta. Coverage for many contraceptive drug and health products is available to Albertans with a government-sponsored health benefit plan, and Albertans with a government-sponsored low-income health benefit plan receive these products free of charge.

I just want to touch on another example of how we're supporting women in our ministry. This is a program that I am particularly proud of, that we introduced a while back, as it relates to rural sexual assault supports through Northwestern Polytechnic microcredential program. We provided a \$290,000 grant to Northwestern Polytechnic to develop a new microcredential program to ensure that more rural and remote health care providers are trained to perform sexual assault evidence kit collections.

Our government is also providing funding for training grants to ensure relevant medical professionals working in rural and remote settings can access the training free of charge. Government focused on increasing the types of training opportunities available, which included sponsoring the University of Calgary's sexual assault course and conference, a plenary lecture and workshop at the rural emergency room physician conference, as well as in-person training sessions at rural and remote emergency departments across the province. To date more than 350 medical professionals and more than 30 nursing students have taken rural sexual assault support sponsored training and increased their competency to provide comprehensive and trauma-informed medical care for survivors of sexual assault.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Minister.

Member Ceci caught my attention. Are you looking for block or shared time, sir?

Member Ceci: I'd like to share.

The Chair: Over to the minister.

Ms Fir: I prefer block, please.

The Chair: It looks like block it is, and we'll set the clock accordingly. Over to you, sir.

Member Ceci: Thank you. Good morning, Minister. As the shadow minister for arts and culture I've spoken with stakeholders across the province in the creative economy sector, and I'm pleased to be able to bring some of their concerns and questions to the minister today, starting first with the AFA, on page 89 of the fiscal plan.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts plays an important role in supporting Alberta's artists and arts organizations, with over 400 grants in Edmonton and Calgary alone. Ensuring the AFA has adequate funding is really critical. I'd like to point out that despite the increase to Budget 2025, taking inflation and population growth into account, the AFA is still not funded at the level that it was

funded under the previous NDP government when you appreciate those '18-19 dollars seven years till today.

Looking at the \$4.5 million increase for AFA on page 89, the Glenbow Museum in Calgary is scheduled, in the estimate book on page 54, to receive a decrease in funding of \$2,288,000. The fiscal plan says that Glenbow's \$2 million decrease will be made up by the AFA, and there's over a quarter-million dollar discrepancy in those two numbers. Am I correct in saying that the \$2 million of the \$4.5 million new to AFA will go to the Glenbow Museum, which means that, essentially, there's only \$2.5 million available for new or previous grantees?

When planning for Budget 2025, particularly AFA on page 54 of estimates, did any consultations with artists, cultural organizations, and underrepresented communities take place, and how are those community voices included in the budget planning process writ large?

Looking at the granting system, page 89 fiscal. If we look at that granting system and how it operates in Alberta, I've heard from stakeholders that the system for grants is out of date with the needs of artists and organizations. For instance, stakeholders have said that the length of time they're required to wait between applying and receiving funds means that some projects stall out before they receive any money. Long wait times to hear whether a grant application was successful can also leave organizations scrambling at the last minute to complete the projects. I've heard, too, that several arcane rules exist that can prevent successful projects from being completed. We've heard, for instance, from musicians that have prerecorded a single that they've made with funding from a grant that it's not allowed to be on an album that they receive different funding from.

10:55

The overwhelming feedback I've heard from organizations is a lack of operational funding opportunities in their organizations. They get the same AFA grant year after year, and their operations are going up every year, of course. Not all organizations or art groups require capital funding investment, but many of them still struggle to keep the lights on and programs running. What is the government doing to support operational budgets for these art groups?

There are no performance measures in the business plan relating to how grant funding is accessed or distributed to artists. What work is being done by the ministry to ensure that artists are aware of the grants they qualify for? Is there a registry or database for all grants Alberta artists have eligibility for? Does the ministry track uptake in grants in Alberta?

Relating to key objective 1.5 in the business plan, the federal government has announced two liaisons for Alberta to help ensure that all available Canada Council for the Arts funding is taken up. How is the province supporting this work? Will the minister be joining them in the efforts to ensure a larger share of all dollars on the table are accessed by Alberta artists? These are federal dollars.

Looking to the future of the creative sector in Alberta, how is the government supporting the next generation of artists and cultural producers who are increasingly working in digital spaces? Is there a strategy to future-proof Alberta's cultural industries in an evolving digital landscape?

I think I'll skip over the CIP program questions and go right to the Alberta music commissioner. In the business plan key objective 1.2 relates to developing a strategy to grow Alberta's music industry and establish an Alberta music commission. I think that's great. It's long overdue. In fact, Texas and Nashville both have music commissions and very vibrant music scenes. How far along are these plans, Minister? Regarding the commissioner, will an

open recruitment process be held? Will resources for the music commission's office mirror that of the Film Commission's office?

Will the strategy to grow Alberta's music industry speak to the needs of private and not-for-profit venue owners, musicians, producers, promoters, and others in this field? The recent music city report that you reference indicates that some venues are closing, resulting in our musicians going elsewhere to make a living in places like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. What metrics does the ministry have to measure if artists stay in Alberta? Does the ministry engage with Alberta artists who have left to pursue careers in the arts to learn about the challenges they faced while working here?

Moving on to business plan objective 1.2. In a related situation, the Oilers Entertainment Group will receive substantial public investment, \$69 million from the CRL and \$52 million over three years from the province, to build a large concert venue downtown. Media has reported that smaller independent music venues in the core will be negatively impacted. Consequently, there'll be fewer opportunities for local bands to play and fewer options for local promoters. What has the minister heard from these smaller independent venues, and how might she ensure that they are not negatively impacted by this new partially publicly funded large concert business? Might the minister in the future look to the Alberta music commissioner, indeed my own Bill 211, the Arts and Creative Economy Advisory Council Act, for guidance on how to mitigate impacts on smaller clubs and local promoters and musicians from this kind of government action?

I'm going to move on, Minister, to mid-size cities. In the fiscal plan under arts, sports, and recreation capital on page 111 while the Arts Commons and Contemporary Calgary transformations and the Winspear phase 3 expansions are all worthy projects and the provincial investment is welcome, how does the minister ensure that small and mid-sized arts companies aren't priced out of renting those new and expanded spaces?

Additionally, how do mid-size cities compete with Calgary and Edmonton for capital investment? Alberta has a number of growing cities throughout our province. What specific supports are being filtered to growing communities to ensure opportunities for artists are present? For example, the Lethbridge Symphony presents in the Yates centre, a facility no longer adequate in terms of size and acoustics. They perform in the third-largest city in Alberta. In addition to the symphony's capital needs, what is the minister doing to support small and mid-size communities facing increases in costs to utilities, rents, maintenance, and labour?

Performance measure 2(a) in the business plan tracks the percentage of Albertans participating in arts events and activities. Does the ministry track this data specific to regions across the province? Are there any considerable discrepancies between different communities or regions regarding the percentage of residents who have access to the arts, and can the minister share that data?

I think, Minister, I'll stop there and let you respond.

The Chair: Excellent.

Minister, over to you.

Ms Fir: Well, thank you to the member for those questions. I'm going to go quite quickly here to try to address most of those questions and comments. Let's start with the Glenbow Museum. Our government has supported the museum for decades, and we continue to do so in Budget 2025. We know it's a key part of Calgary's arts, culture, and heritage storytelling, and we're looking forward to its reopening in 2026. We supported the Glenbow Museum with \$40 million in capital grants for its revitalization

project, the Glenbow re-imagined project. Though the Glenbow will remain closed until 2026, our government continues to invest \$2.3 million through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts to support the museum's care and conservation of Crown artifacts and collections. While the source of funding is changing, there is no change to how much funding is being provided. It's simply being provided via the AFA versus Arts, Culture and Status of Women. When the Glenbow reopens, it will focus on being an art museum, making it a natural fit to be more closely aligned with the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

Speaking of the AFA – and I would like to reiterate what I said in my opening comments – we're keeping our commitment to responsibly increase funding for the arts, including that \$4.5 million increase to the AFA. As I mentioned – it's worth noting again – it will result in record-level funding by 2027-28. The increased AFA funding will help arts organizations and artists in all corners of the province expand programming and ensure the arts continue to be supported for the benefit of all Albertans. Budget 2025 will allow the AFA to continue to increase access and circulation of the provincial art collection, ensuring Albertans can enjoy the collection first-hand. The arts play a significant role in enhancing the quality of life for Albertans, supporting economic development, and preserving and sharing our unique culture and history.

I just want to touch a little bit specifically on: what did the AFA do with the increased budget provided last year? The focus was definitely to increase – it was on artists. The AFA increased the maximum amount for its individual project grant program to \$18,000, up from \$15,000, and increased the total number of artists who received grants. As of the end of 2024 the AFA had approved 64 per cent more artist grants than the previous year, and for 2025-2026 support for artists will continue as the board also turns its attention to increasing support for arts organizations.

The member also spoke a little bit about the Alberta music action plan and the music commissioner, so I'd like to provide some information on that. As the member has correctly noted, our music industry has incredible potential for growth, and for us to grow the sector, including live performances, sound recording, and audiovisual, interactive media, we need to be deliberate. An Alberta music action plan, which is included in my ministry's business plan, will guide our efforts to capitalize on existing competitive advantages and position Alberta's music sector for long-term, sustainable growth.

11:05

We've been working closely with the sector for several years on growing music. In 2020 the province partnered with West Anthem to develop a music ecosystem study, and informed by that work, strategies for Edmonton, Calgary, and smaller municipalities were released in 2023. Those strategies included recommendations on what we could do as a province to grow the sector and help it recover from the pandemic as well as what municipalities and other players could do.

As part of our work we also looked at all of the programs within my ministry providing support for the music sector, including those offered by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, the Alberta media fund, community grants, and through our cultural industries branch. What we found was that over the last three years my ministry's average annual investment in the music sector has been about \$14.8 million. Funding supports a diverse range of musicians and organizations, including individual artists, music-related nonprofit organizations, sound-recording agencies, and music festivals.

We are already investing significantly, and we need to make sure we look at how we can potentially modernize our funding to make

sure we're fully optimizing that investment. Last fall I met with 13 industry representatives to discuss the opportunities and challenges within the music industry and discuss the potential of an Alberta action plan, and I want to thank the sector. I'm grateful for their ongoing support and feedback, and I look forward to finalizing and releasing a plan this year, as outlined in the business plan.

Regarding the music commissioner, one of the reasons we've been as successful as we've been in growing the sector, the film and television sector, is because of the work of our award-winning provincial Film Commission, so it makes sense that we would consider how a provincial music commission could support and grow the music sector in Alberta, serving as a central point of contact for the music sector and helping to navigate government policies and regulations that impact the industry.

If establishing a music commission and a commissioner role within the department is one of the actions in our final plan, I will look to my department to determine who that individual should be. Just like the film commissioner, an Alberta music commissioner would work closely with the province's music businesses, musicians, and other organizations to help navigate government so we can be as responsive to the sector's needs, showcase Alberta on the national and international stage, and implement our action plan, so they will need to have experience navigating government. I do not have a role as minister in hiring staff; however, I assure you that the chosen staff member will be fully qualified.

Jumping now to – the member had spoken about the Oilers Entertainment Group project in Edmonton. Arts and culture are a big part of what draws people to Edmonton's downtown, and the OEG Fan Park funding is an investment in Edmonton's downtown economy, as is the Winspear support, which is also included in Budget 2025. It's also an investment in our music sector, creating new opportunities for both artists and music fans.

Our music sector offers incredible opportunities for economic growth, which is why Arts, Culture and Status of Women's business plan includes an initiative to develop the Alberta music action plan that I spoke about. Our government has invested nearly \$15 million each year to support musicians and music organizations through the Alberta media fund, community grants, and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. This includes support for things such as the 2023 Junos and the 2024 Canadian country music awards in Alberta, both of which were hosted in Edmonton.

I also want to speak a little bit about advocating for an increased share of federal funding, Alberta getting a more proportional share. I agree with the member. You know, he mentioned the Canada council working to increase funding. This is a direct result of our continued calls on the federal government to provide Alberta our fair share of funding. I've advocated more than once to the previous federal minister. I will be advocating to the newly appointed federal minister on this file. Alberta is certainly not getting their fair share in many areas, including arts and culture, so our advocacy there will continue.

Jumping to supports for the arts in rural Alberta, you know, in my mandate letter to the current chair and the chair before that I directed them to support more individual local artists, particularly in rural communities, in their work. That's straight from me to my mandate letter to the chair. The AFA is often the only funder of arts outside of our big cities and has several programs that are designed to support volunteer-led arts organizations, not just professional ones, which helps ensure funding continues to flow to rural and smaller communities. I also provided, as I mentioned, direction to the AFA to continue to prioritize Alberta artists and art organizations, including ensuring artists in rural and smaller communities are supported. In addition, last year my ministry provided \$375,000 in grants to help 111 community organizations

plan and co-ordinate celebrations across the province as part of Alberta Culture Days in September.

I just want to touch on funding for the community facility enhancement program. Budget 2025 maintains funding to the CFEP program at record levels, allowing us to continue supporting nonprofit organizations with local capital projects that stimulate economic growth, create jobs, and build our province. Through this grant our government supports hundreds of projects such as playgrounds, community halls, art centres, and recreation facilities, that we know are so important to the economy and quality of life for families and all Albertans.

With respect to funding in urban areas versus rural areas, last year urban areas represented about 68 per cent of successful projects versus . . .

The Chair: Well, thank you, Minister. We'll have to catch the rest of that in the next one.

MLA Hayter, you caught my attention. Are you looking for block or shared time?

Ms Hayter: I can stick with block.

The Chair: Okay. Back to you.

Ms Hayter: Yeah. Through the chair, on page 30 of the business plan the ministry allocated \$15.7 million to implement the Alberta 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence. I'm wondering where the funding is coming from. Can you give us specific breakdowns of the amounts, whether it's funded from which ministry, and for which initiative is it going to? Has it been previously announced? How much is allocated for 2025 to 2026? How can Albertans be confident this money will be effectively targeted to the greatest areas of need?

On page 30 a performance indicator shows Alberta still has alarming high rates of intimate partner violence. Right now it's 596.69 per 100,000 population. I'm wondering how the minister can justify maintaining essentially the same inadequate level of funding when Alberta continues to have one of the highest rates of intimate partner violence in Canada. This flat funding effectively is a cut when accounting for inflation and population growth.

The ministry allocated \$19.7 million for status of women in 2025 to 2026, which is virtually unchanged from previous years, and underspent last year despite the rising rate of IPV in Alberta. I'm wondering how the government will justify the stagnant funding when Alberta has the highest rate of police-reported intimate violence causing bodily harm or death in provinces. You know, I'm looking at the business indicator on page 30 of the business plan. The rate of police-reported IPV for Alberta for women increased marginally from 613.7 to 596.69 per 100,000 between 2022 and 2023. Given these minimal improvements, why isn't the government making a more substantial investment to address this crisis?

Women's shelters in Alberta are consistently operating over capacity, with many women and children being turned away, yet the increase for women's shelters is only \$19 million over three years, which works out to just \$6 million per year spread across all of the shelters in this province. Why is the funding so low when the need is so high?

The business plan mentions eliminating gender-based violence as part of the ministry's mandate, yet the performance indicator shows almost no progress. What specific accountability measures exist to ensure that this funding actually produces meaningful results rather than just maintaining status quo?

Mr. Chair, in light of the devastating statistics of Statistics Canada showing that more than 4 out of 10 Indigenous women have

been sexually assaulted at least once since the age of 15, what specific funding is dedicated from this ministry for violence against Indigenous women specifically? The funding for gender-based violence initiatives in Alberta pales in comparison to what other provinces like Ontario and British Columbia are investing on a per capita basis. Why is Alberta consistently falling behind other provinces in addressing this critical issue?

11:15

The federal government has committed the \$54 million to Alberta for gender-based violence initiatives, but reviewing the status of women estimates and business plan, there's no clear line items to track this federal funding unless the minister is insinuating that the majority of her ministry's GBV funding is through the federal agreement. Where exactly is the \$54 million reflected in the budget documents? How much is being used and what for?

Through you, Chair, the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters reported that over 11,000 women and children were turned away from emergency shelters in 2023-24 due to lack of capacity. The ministry's allocation for women's shelters represents less than .1 per cent of the provincial budget. How does the minister reconcile this small investment with the life-threatening consequences women are facing if they can't access safe shelter?

The ministry business plan acknowledges that the status of women is responsible for eliminating gender-based violence. Yet the estimates show no real meaningful increase in funding to match this mandate. Does the minister believe that eliminating gender-based violence is actually achievable with the current level of investment? Or is it simply aspirational language with no real commitment behind it?

Shelter directors across the province are telling me and have publicly stated that they're struggling with crumbling infrastructure, inability to offer competitive wages, and limited programming due to chronic underfunding. The \$19 million over three years for women's shelters doesn't even account for inflation. So I'm wondering: how does the minister expect shelters to maintain, let alone improve, services when the real value of their funding is effectively decreasing?

The Chair: You have four minutes. Would you like to cede it to somebody else on your team?

Ms Hayter: I'm going to cede my time to the minister.

The Chair: Okay.

Minister, back to you.

Ms Fir: Well, thank you for those questions. I've talked before, and I'll speak again about the 10-year strategy on the national action plan to end gender-based violence that our ministry is working on. It's going to be a made-in-Alberta action plan tailored to Alberta's needs based on the stakeholder feedback and engagement, which, as I mentioned, included over 500 stakeholders involved in those engagements in addition to the online survey that we had. The goal is to enhance the existing work, as I already mentioned, being done by all the ministries, but also look for duplications, identifying gaps, and really focusing on breaking the cycle and identifying root causes.

Those engagements included community organizations, Indigenous communities, 2SLGBTQIA-plus individuals, refugees and immigrants, engaging men and boys, and most importantly engaging survivors. It was held in 11 different cities and towns across our province, and in each of those 11 cities and towns there was also an Indigenous-led and Indigenous-focused stakeholder engagement as well.

Well, actually I just want to pause there for a minute. I think I might have spoken to this last year. Working on ending gender-based violence is about working on making it a rarity and making it nonreoccurring. It should not be the norm. It should not be accepted. I know I'm passionate about it, and my colleagues are passionate about turning it into something, as I say, that's more of a rarity or nonreoccurring.

I've mentioned before that myself and other ministers, particularly the Minister of Children and Family Services, have spent a lot of time visiting and touring women's shelters and speaking to the staff, speaking to some of the women, interacting with some of the children. One of the things that I'm most passionate about is trying to break the cycle because the innocent children that are impacted by this, you know, those folks that they should feel most safe and protected by, mom and dad or parents or guardians, are often those that they're in the most danger with, and they deserve a fair chance. Unless the cycle is broken and we're identifying root causes, that will continue. Between my ministry and the overarching co-ordinated approach of the gender-based violence strategy with the immediate short-term and long-term actions in conjunction with the incredible and important work my minister colleagues are doing, we're absolutely going to see progress dealing with this incredibly complex, devastating matter.

The federal funds. Federal money flows through the status of women budget to others. Last year that money supported several other ministries. Just some examples of transfers to other departments made include \$1 million to Advanced Education, \$7.2 million to Children and Family Services, \$1.3 million to Indigenous Relations, \$2.1 million to Justice.

I just want to speak a little bit more about some of the funding initiatives to end gender-based violence. Again, supporting women's shelter programming to focus on access to safety and inclusive services and supports is paramount, and supporting reporting and prevention efforts at postsecondary institutions and First Nations colleges to address campus sexual violence is important. We also focus on strengthening supports for Albertans navigating the justice system, including developing more survivorcentric, culturally sensitive, trauma-informed services, increasing access to education and resources related to elder abuse for service providers, supporting academic research on gender-related injury and illness in the workplace, implementing Indigenous-led initiatives that advance the Alberta Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Roadmap.

The Chair: Thanks for that, Minister.

Over to the government caucus. MLA de Jonge, you're up first.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you very much, Chair. Minister, block time or back and forth?

Ms Fir: Block, please.

Ms de Jonge: Sounds good.

Well, first of all, thank you for being here this morning and to your officials as well. I really appreciate all the amazing work you are doing in Alberta.

Just to kick us off here, through the chair. Now, Alberta's economy is growing, it's flourishing, and it's important that Alberta's government continues to build on its success, attracting investments, building partnerships, and creating new opportunities across all Alberta sectors. Minister, key objective 1.5 on page 28 of the business plan states it's the intent to "increase women's participation in Alberta's economy, including continued support of women pursuing careers in skilled trades, the technical arts and in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)."

Ensuring women have opportunities not only to participate and compete in our economy but also to pursue the foundational education that supports their careers is so important, and I'm glad to see your ministry is working on this. My question through the chair is: can the minister showcase the specific strategies that are used when advocating for women's participation in the economy?

In addition to that, I'm just looking at performance metric 1(d). The number of women in STEM is steadily increasing over the years. I'm wondering: what factors is the ministry monitoring as leading to that growth? Minister, will you adjust the funding of the previously mentioned scholarships to fund even more scholarships for women in STEM?

Again from page 28 of the business plan I briefly mentioned technical arts in the last question, and I see that under initiatives supporting key objectives that \$275,000 is allocated towards scholarships for women in the technical arts. My question is: can the minister just talk about the importance of these scholarships? You know, why are they important? And what's the feedback from Albertans that you're hearing on those programs?

Finally, do we have numbers to track progress for women in STEM programs across the province?

With that, I'm actually just going to cede my time to my colleague MLA Wright.

Mr. Wright: Well, thank you to my colleague from Chestermere-Strathmore.

Mr. Chair, I appreciate a little latitude. I will be speaking to page 28 of the business plan, but we'll be taking a bit of the long road to get there.

The Chair: Always makes me nervous when you're asking for permission for long roads, but please proceed.

Mr. Wright: Through you, Mr. Chair, to the minister. Minister, I'm always thankful for any opportunity I get to work with you and connect with you in my role as military liaison. Much like the status of women tends to flow through a great many different ministries for different initiatives, so does my role as the military liaison overlap with many ministries.

11:25

I'll be speaking to page 28 of the business plan. Again, I'm very thankful for the work you've put in on showcasing the cultural impact that the Canadian Armed Forces have had on Alberta's history. You know, if we go through and take a look at a number of grants that we've been able to work towards, we've been able to advocate for funding for organizations like No Stone Left Alone and others that really showcase the importance of remembering those who have served this country so diligently.

In addition to grants, I'm also thankful for you listening to the advocacy that I've been able to bring on creating the Canadian Armed Forces Day in Alberta and recognizing it in perpetuity as the first Sunday of every June going forward. I'm incredibly thankful, and from the number of CAF members and their families and our veterans there are so many people so incredibly thankful for the opportunity of being able to come out this past June to celebrate the very first Canadian Armed Forces Day in Alberta. Thank you for that.

Minister, when I tie it back into looking at initiatives that support key objectives, the goal to distribute \$84.6 million to nonprofit organizations through the community grants program, including the community initiative program, the community facility enhancement program, and other grants, I'd like to focus on this perhaps from a veteran perspective if we could. As we bring veterans to the forefront, they have such invaluable skills

and lived experiences. Whether it's in leadership or whether it was a trade they developed while in their service, many transition into roles where they can serve their community from a civilian perspective.

Ensuring that veterans and veteran-led organizations have access to these community grants could further support workforce development that would later have more impact on other ministries such as the program with Helmets to Hardhats in Advanced Education, but it also helps with the reintegration and overall quality of life of these service members as they transition into a retired state. Minister, I have a question. Has the ministry considered expanding eligibility criteria within these grant programs to ensure greater access for veteran-led organizations and initiatives such as Veterans Association Food Bank here in Edmonton or the Legion throughout the province? Who is eligible to receive these grants? Can community groups within my riding apply for these grants as well to expand into additional services that support members such as the South Alberta Light Horse stationed in my riding?

With a few minutes left here I'll actually cede my time to Member Stephan from Red Deer-South.

The Chair: MLA Stephan, please proceed.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you. Minister, it's great to be here with you today. Thank you for the super-duper job you're doing. I just want to refer to page 28 of the business plan. Key objective 1.6 shows an objective, and I'll just read it as follows: "Continue to invest in Alberta's world-class cultural and heritage sites, including museums, zoos, science centres and theatres." Really happy to ask this question because, of course, one of the museums we have in Alberta is the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology. I remember as a young man living in Drumheller, I would go with all my brothers and hang out at that museum because it's really fun. All around there is the badlands, and you've got to hike there. It had a really cool planetarium, and you see these giant dinosaur models.

It's just an awesome place to go with your families. Actually, as a parent I remember taking my young sons a couple of years ago. For those Albertans who haven't been to this museum, I mean, there are so many awesome models. Big dinosaurs: it's just so cool. And there's this cool planetarium. In the winter, you know, there are all these plants, and it feels green and summery. It's nice to feel that, get out of the winter that's sometimes too long. The other really neat thing is that there's also this – it kind of shows prehistoric aquatic animals. They have this model. It's a plastic see-through floor. I remember going with my three-year-old son. Of course, depth perception. I'd walk on this floor, and it looks like – it's see-through – you'd fall through. I remember my son just gingerly kind of walking onto this because he wasn't so sure of that.

Just so many neat experiences. Like, as a parent, I kind of remember that as a highlight, right? You know, that was many years ago. My children are all grown up. But that's just an awesome highlight. What I'm saying is that these museums, these different provincial facilities and zoos – I mean, the Calgary Zoo. Oh, man, so many awesome memories of that. My wife would always take our young kids to the Calgary Zoo. Anyways. Sorry.

Okay. Line 1.7 as an objective is to drive increased attendance and participation in programming at government-owned and operated heritage museums and historic sites. Minister, I just want to ask about: what initiatives are given to families as incentives to visit and return to these museums after their first visit? Can you provide details on what kind of educational programs are being

offered at these museums and historic sites, and what efforts are being made to make these affordable for families?

The Chair: We just squeezed out that last little bit.

Mr. Stephan: Sure. Why not?

The Chair: Yeah, absolutely.

Minister, over to you.

Ms Fir: Well, thank you very much for those questions. Why don't we start with the Member for Chestermere-Strathmore talking about women's economic participation? The member raised some really great questions about supporting women's economic empowerment, something that, as I've said before and I'll say again, I'm very passionate about. We want to ensure that women in Alberta have access to good-quality jobs and that they can succeed in fulfilling careers. That's so crucial to the success of our province.

One of the ways that my ministry is helping to support that is through our scholarship programs. As I've mentioned before, this includes our women in STEM – science, technology, engineering, mathematics – scholarship, the Persons Case scholarships, and the new women in technical and applied arts scholarship, announced last year. Collectively, these three scholarships will award \$275,000 this year thanks to Budget 2025 if passed. Each of these scholarships provides \$2,500 to recipients, meaning that we'll be able to support 110 Albertans in 2025 through the three programs. While I can't individually call all the scholarship winners to congratulate them, I do try to at least call a few each time to congratulate them and just learn a little bit more about their stories and why they're taking the field of study they're taking. I know the impact these scholarships have on them, and it's a pleasure to be able to make some of those calls.

Another initiative that I'll profile is our online resource directory, the Women's Hub. It offers women access to all sorts of resources to help them be successful, including education programs, grants, child care, job connectors, just to name a few things. As the member noted, my ministry tracks Statistics Canada data on the number of women enrolled in postsecondary STEM programs in Alberta. It's encouraging to see the total number of women enrolled in STEM programs increasing.

It's clear that there's still work to be done in Alberta and in all provinces and across the country. That's one of the reasons why we were so proud to launch the new women in technical and applied arts scholarship last year, to provide additional support to women studying in fields that combine both technology and art, things like game design, animation and modelling, sound engineering, and visual effects. That way, we offer women opportunities in exciting and growing fields, and we can also expand the way young people think about STEM fields. I'm looking forward to awarding the first of these scholarships very shortly and having those phone calls with some of those recipients to learn a little bit more about why they chose the field of study they did.

11:35

Sticking with the member's questions on scholarships, she had asked if we had received any feedback on the new scholarship. Again, I want to first say that the scholarship itself is a direct result of concerns that we heard from the community and in the roundtables that I do. We heard concerns about support for women in that area, about those who are working to empower women and those in our film, television, and music sectors. They all shared that there are great opportunities across a variety of fields as technology is integrated into all sectors, including cultural industries and the arts, but oftentimes one of the only things holding them back in these

areas is having enough skilled people to do the work, including skilled women. So happy to be able to report that we did have a great interest in this new scholarship, with about 50 applicants in its first year.

The member had also asked about what progress is being made to increase the number of women enrolled in STEM programs in Alberta, and I can report that we're making some progress in that area. In 2019-2020 there were 13,560 women enrolled in STEM programs. That number has grown, and the most recent data we have shows that 14,685 women were enrolled in 2022-23. But, again, we know that there's more work to be done as women make up half of our population but only represent about a quarter of the employees in the STEM fields. We're looking forward to increasing our efforts in that area.

Moving over to the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat on his question around grants for military personnel and veterans. First off, I thank him for the incredible work he does in his liaison role. I've had the opportunity to attend several events with him, and I thank him for the important work he does for these important members of our community and our province. He's clearly dedicated to supporting veterans, and I agree that they bring important leadership and experience to communities across our province.

Grant programs such as the CIP project, the community initiatives program project stream, and the CFEP were intentionally designed to support diverse public programs, services, and facilities, including those organizations serving military personnel and veterans. Veteran-led nonprofit organizations can apply for these community grants, and the member can encourage the veteran organizations in his community to check out the information that's available on alberta.ca for information on how to apply. Our online resources include program overviews, grant information sessions, program videos, guidelines, criteria, and timelines.

I'm happy to report that in the last two years 24 military support organizations have received grants through these programs. These include \$695,000 for 19 Royal Canadian Legion branches; a grant for the army, navy, and air force veterans in Canada; and \$75,000 for the Legacy Place Society to support military personnel and veterans. Another great organization that you mentioned – and I got to attend their event with you – the No Stone Left Alone Memorial Foundation has received \$61,200 in grants since 2020. Such an important program, I think, especially as it relates to children, to help them even try to fathom or appreciate or understand the sacrifice of these individuals and the importance of remembering them and making sure every one of them is recognized every year. For those unfamiliar, this incredible organization is dedicated to honouring and remembering Canada's veterans by holding commemorative events and placing poppies on the gravestones of veterans.

As it relates to program eligibility, eligibility is very broad for these grants to ensure that nonprofit organizations, including those serving veterans, can access these funds. I look forward to working with the member to ensure our veterans and the organizations working with them continue to be supported in the future, so thank you again for your work.

Jumping over to museums and heritage sites, I share the member's enthusiasm . . .

Mr. Stephan: Good stuff.

Ms Fir: Yup. Good stuff.

For the memories, whether it's our own memories growing up visiting these sites or that we take our kids to or our nieces to – I know I've had the opportunity over the years when my nieces are

visiting to take them to some of these incredible museums and heritage sites. What a kick it is for them.

The Royal Tyrrell. I'm very spoiled in my job. I get to go behind the scenes to tour and touch. I only touch what they say I can touch, but to be able to just see the extraordinary fossils and things we have. Yeah. I've been to the Royal Tyrrell a few times, and it's one of those places where you just can't quite get enough of.

We're blessed to have 21 amazing provincial museums and historic sites. I'm almost done visiting all of them at least once, but it's just incredible how they are spread out throughout every corner of our province to very small ones that offer such a unique, intimate experience to ones like the Royal Tyrrell, with hundreds and thousands of visitors.

The Member for Red Deer-South raised a series of questions about something, again, that's important to me as well. When we want to talk about ensuring our provincially operated museums and historic sites are accessible and affordable for Albertans, you know, I'll assure the member that our admission prices have remained unchanged in Budget 2025. We've ensured travelling exhibits like the recent *Angkor* exhibit at the RAM do not have additional entrance fees. We're also offering something we call an Experience Alberta's History annual pass, which is a great way to visit all 21 of our provincially owned museums and historic sites. The pass provides unlimited regular admission for one year at a discounted rate. There are different types of passes available. In addition, we offer several free admission opportunities.

The Chair: Minister, your time just expired in this block.

MLA Ceci has caught my attention. We're in the lightning round now, folks, and it's also known as the use it or lose it. Let's go through the items here, just in case, so that everyone is aware when we go into this round. No one may speak longer than five minutes at a time, time cannot be ceded to any other caucus member, and if it's not combined time, then the member or minister may only speak once.

With that, the veteran of the crowd, over to you, Mr. Ceci.

Member Ceci: Thank you very much. Regarding business plan 1.2., just following up on your Oilers Entertainment Group comment about celebrating the investment . . .

The Chair: The clerk has nudged me here. Were you looking for block or shared time?

Member Ceci: Oh, I can share.

Ms Fir: I'm good with block.

The Chair: Okay, there we go.

Member Ceci: Okay. Just following up on the Oilers Entertainment Group response, where you celebrated the investment in a large concert venue. It didn't seem to be recognized that local, small, non-for-profit venues, our local musicians, our local promoters will all be negatively impacted potentially by not being able to get on that stage, because national acts will come in or U.S. acts will come in and essentially they'll eat the lunch of the smaller for-profit venues. I think that's critical that you have a music strategy that's going to be released in the new budget year, and I hope it's sooner than later because that would be a great place to get advice and direction from a music commissioner and others, who could say, you know, that this may not be all roses for small businesses that are bringing in Albertans and putting them on stages. That won't happen on a large concert venue stage.

Anyway, moving on to CKUA. In estimates on page 54, line 3.2, Cultural Industries, it says \$8,235,000. Is this the line that funds CKUA? I really like the tag line, Minister, for CKUA, Alberta's Voice for Music, Arts, and Culture, and it's really, really, really true. The last significant investment for CKUA was \$5 million during the Redford era, and since then they've only received \$60,000 annually. It must be said that that was also \$60,000 during my term in the NDP term in government. Has the minister met with CKUA to understand the impact their stagnant operational grant is having on their ability to continue to do the work they do at full scope? CKUA significantly helps build the province's arts ecosystem. This radio station punches above their weight. They foster and promote new artists, stream to well over 100 countries world-wide, and tell the world about our wonderful artists, our festivals, and everything going on in this province. CKUA is beloved far and wide for their diversity in musical entertainment. Understanding that the government does not provide funds for debt servicing, why hasn't CKUA benefited from increased grants for operations?

11:45

Moving on to the book publishing industry in Alberta, Minister, again on page 54 of the estimates, line 3.2, cultural industries. Considering that your mandate is to grow the cultural industries, what is your plan to support the growth of the book publishing industry in Alberta? Given that 80 per cent of Albertans support an increase in the book publishing industry in this province, what would it take for the ministry to allocate more money from their budget to the Alberta book publishers fund? The ministry found money in 2023 to increase funding to the film industry, \$5 million. In 2024 money was found to increase AFA and again this year. What's holding the ministry back from finding money for the book publishers industry in the 2025 budget?

Also on that point, the ministry has publicly demonstrated their support and respect for the book publishers industry in Alberta. They have attended events, proclaimed Alberta Book Day, and have been publicly supportive of the important work that book publishers and their associations do. The ministry has seen how increased government investment in this industry can lead to sustained growth in a flourishing industry in British Columbia. It's time we see that same GDP growth here in our province. It's time to monetize this support in real terms by increasing the Alberta book publishers fund, and the same can be said for the Alberta Magazine Publishers Association.

Just on the topic of the Francophonie, looking now at key objective 2.6, to champion the ongoing development and vitality of the francophone community, and the supporting initiative of the French policy action plan, on page 30 of the business plan. To be able to make their art full-time and make a living, many francophone artists are moving away from Alberta to Montreal and France, which hurts the diverse cultural fabric in our province. Like many artists in the English community they must move elsewhere to be artists full-time. What's the minister doing to keep francophone musicians here in our province? Can you expand on what the French policy action plan entails and how it will support francophone musicians? Can you fill that in more for me?

I'll stop there.

Ms Fir: Well, I thank the member for those questions. I guess I'll start off by saying that we have wonderful stages available for acts of all sizes, including new space at the Winspear and the Jubilees, and we want to make sure that we're supporting artists and musicians of all sizes. I think the Winspear and our two Jubilee auditoria are good examples of venues that provide those options.

If we go over to CKUA, I can share a little bit about how our government is supporting the music industry and what we do for groups like the CKUA who continue to face challenges. First off, I congratulate the CKUA on the excellent fundraising initiative that they had. They recently announced a \$1 million donation, I believe, from a private donor. I will continue to advocate; then I would also hope that the federal government would step in more for a public broadcaster like the CKUA, not just one or two in particular public broadcasters but, you know, as a key partner in fostering the long-term growth and sustainability of our music and cultural industries.

Government does provide annual operating support to venues like CKUA, the National Music Centre, and our government has invested more than half a million dollars in CKUA over the last five years and an additional \$5 million in capital support for CKUA's facility. I remain committed to championing innovative and unique venues like CKUA in Edmonton, the National Music Centre in Calgary, and ensuring they continue to play an important role in Alberta and Canada's vibrant music scene.

The member touched on this, that requests for debt relief have not historically been submitted for consideration to Treasury Board and Finance. Funding for capital projects is provided as one-time grants with the exception that the organization is responsible for cost overruns in its operations. Support for debt repayment does not align with the intention of a capital grant and would create a precedent that would likely trigger additional requests for similar support.

I'm glad the member brought up books and magazines. In addition to supporting our film, television, and music sector, my ministry also proudly supports Alberta book and magazine publishers. As noted in my business plan, this includes support for Alberta publishing companies and the associations that support them, the Alberta Magazine Publishers Association and the Alberta Book Publishers Association. Mr. Chair, I believe they're here with us today, so let me take a moment to recognize them and thank them for their ongoing work to share Alberta's stories with the world. I also want to note that the Alberta Book Publishers Association celebrated its 50th anniversary earlier this week.

Members may recall that I had the honour of welcoming several of our provincial publishers to the Legislature last November for their seventh annual Alberta Book Day. What an incredible event it is that they do there in terms of having so many books on display and books that can be taken and gifted to others to share amazing Alberta artists. I know those are some of the biggest hits in my constituency office, particularly as it relates to children's books. To be able to share Alberta publishers is quite exciting. Alberta's book publishers gather to showcase their award-winning books, highlighting our government's investment in the growth of our local publishing industry. I know it's something that many of us look forward to every year.

I'm proud to say that Budget 2025 continues our investment with more than \$1.6 million in support for Alberta publishers as well as continued support for the Alberta Magazine Publishers Association and the Alberta Book Publishers Association.

Additionally, the publishing sector benefits from project funding to support initiatives to enhance the sector as a whole. For example, last year my ministry supported several Alberta publishers to attend international trade shows to profile Alberta Works, and we funded development of a tool kit to enhance accessibility for individuals with literary challenges and visual impairments. We also provided additional funding to the Alberta Magazine Publishers Association to support the annual magazine publishers conference and the media buyer agency lunch and learn.

I look forward to continuing to explore opportunities to maintain and grow a healthy publishing sector here in Alberta and, you know, just amazing things. Whether it's, again, the annual Alberta Book Day or the Alberta book . . .

The Chair: I appreciate that, Minister.

MLA Cyr has caught my attention.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Minister. Minister, would you be okay with block time?

Ms Fir: Yes, please.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Minister.

Minister, I'd like to start off by thanking you and your ministry for the time you've spent here. We're nearing the last 20 minutes here, and you've put a lot of information out.

One of the things I think that needs to be recognized is that we're dealing with a pretty large deficit this year. I recognize that our international neighbours are creating a little bit of heartburn for us. I do respect that our ministers across all ministries are tightening belts right now. You're making hard decisions – and I thank you – while trying to find balance in these decisions you're making. I know that it must be difficult to get through those.

I also would like to thank you for coming up to my constituency in August of 2024. You came up and you actually saw the Frog Lake historic site as well as Buckingham House. I'm going to tell you that it's really neat to have you come up and see some of the landmark sites, if you will, up in my area and hear some of the maybe needs for the local area and how we could move forward. My understanding is that it looks like you're going to be trying to visit all of the sites, and that's very admirable. I will say that. I'm hopeful that gives you a real insight of what's going on.

I'd like to also thank you for your commitment to the francophone community. Myself, I'm a francophone. My family actually got to Canada in 1668, so a long-standing Cyr surname for Canada. I can tell you that we just had a cabane à sucre in Bonnyville, a very well-established francophone community within my constituency. Again, when it comes down to your support of the francophone community, I know it's felt in my area for sure. I've heard that also with the member's statement that MLA Lundy had brought forward this week as well.

11:55

Moving on, the arts, culture, and heritage sectors play a vital role in shaping the identity of our communities when the goal is to enrich the lives of Albertans as investment in cultural infrastructure, preserve our province's history, and create space for economic opportunities and vibrant public spaces. On page 111 of the fiscal plan there are various projects receiving funding such as the Arts Commons and Olympic Plaza transformation, the Telus Spark gallery development, the Winspear Centre phase 3. I know that these projects were all announced in last year's budget. Can the minister please provide an update on the progress of these capital projects and share insights into the future plans or timelines for these completions? Could the minister also provide metrics to show Albertans the benefit of these investments?

Now I'd like also to talk about investing into our local communities. Through the CFEP grant my local constituency really saw some movement in the area. I'd like to thank you again for coming up to my constituency because you also visited the Glendon Arena and we ended up with a CFEP grant for a million dollars

there. Thank you so much. I'll tell you, hockey binds my local communities together.

We also had the Clayton Bellamy foundation grant going into the Strathcona theatre. For us, we have no theatre up in our area, nowhere where people can sit. Thank you for that half million dollar CFEP grant for that as well. It makes a huge difference for us in Bonnyville to be able to have a place we can congregate, invite artists like what you were talking about before. This actually is a huge help.

The other CFEP grant that I was able to get was for my local Stepping Stones women's shelter. This here was a pivotal women's shelter up in my area. I'm going to tell you that that \$1 million that you gave to that women's shelter shows your commitment to women fleeing violence. I'm very thankful for that grant as well, Minister. You can see that you actually got a variety of things, building communities through sports, you brought the arts to Bonnyville, and you're protecting women in my constituency. I can tell you I'm very thankful for all of that.

One of the things that I would lastly like to do in the last 32 seconds: investing in Alberta infrastructure, community, culture, and recreation shows a funding decrease of approximately \$22 million compared to last year. Can you kind of give us some details behind that? I recognize it's going to be very difficult to do that in five minutes.

For all that you've done for my community, Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, we recognize the commitment that you have for Alberta, but more specifically for northeast Alberta. Thank you so much, Minister. I cede that one second over to you.

The Chair: Over to you, Minister.

Ms Fir: Thank you very much to the member for those comments, and thank you for highlighting precisely what I'm always trying to say with real life examples of the amazing work that our community grants programs do. You cited three examples of everything from music, which I know is important to everyone at this table, supporting music and theatre in a smaller community, to the Glendon Arena, which, as you've mentioned, a local arena is what draws people together, whether it's hockey or curling or skating or whatever it is.

Was it there where we had the best perogies I ever had?

Mr. Cyr: Oh, we did.

Ms Fir: Okay. Yeah. Best perogies I ever had, so I'll be calling in a favour for more perogies.

The women's shelter, you know, we talk about as well, protecting women and children and giving them a safe space. What three excellent examples of arts and culture and sports and community and protecting women that we were recently able to fund in your area. There's only so much time a minister and MLA has, but I always try to make it a priority to get out to visit as many of the sites as possible, right? It's only when you actually see what's going on and meet the people that you can truly appreciate what's going on. And when I see an arena falling apart and with the Clayton Bellamy foundation, the aspirations of this incredible theatre, it's so important.

You know, you recognize a deficit budget, which is challenging. It's challenging for our government. It's challenging for me personally. But that's why I'm so proud of our government in making decisions. Despite a deficit there still needs to be balance, and despite a deficit there is still money being awarded to Arts, Culture and Status of Women and into our grant programs because they build communities and they make communities better. They build communities and they make communities stronger, better.

Capital investment. I just want to talk a little bit about some of your questions. I'm happy to share more about how Alberta's government continues to invest in our communities by creating spaces for people to come together and, like we talked about, offer those rich experiences in the arts, culture, and history.

Let's talk about Arts Commons and the Olympic Plaza transformation project. Extraordinary. One of the largest cultural infrastructure projects in Canada's history happening right here in Alberta, in Calgary. It's an investment of \$103 million over seven years. This huge \$660 million undertaking includes the construction of a brand new facility, modernization of the existing Arts Commons, and transformation of Calgary's downtown Olympic Plaza. For those unfamiliar, Arts Commons, again, is one of western Canada's largest art centres, and its facilities support artists and art organizations in the region, bringing incredible local talent to Alberta audiences.

In December I was happy to attend their groundbreaking event, and you can see in downtown Calgary right now that the construction is coming along well. The project is anticipating completion by 2031, and I look forward to seeing this important project progress in the coming years. It will create an anticipated 3,454 full-time construction jobs and have an overall economic impact of \$424 million in GDP. It will also contribute to the revitalization of Calgary's downtown. Upon completion of all phases the facility will be, again, one of the largest arts-focused spaces in Canada right here in Alberta.

I'll give you an update on the Telus Spark Science Centre. We're proud that our government contributed \$9.5 million towards phase 2 of that \$45 million Keep Calgary Curious project at Telus Spark Science Centre. That project will renovate the centre's gallery spaces to enhance educational programming, and a new school group entrance will allow better accessibility to this space. The Keep Calgary Curious project is currently in the design stage and is anticipating project completion by December of 2028. In addition to the obvious tourism and educational value of places like the Telus Spark Science Centre, there's also the added benefit of instilling a love of science and technology in young Albertans, which we will need in our future workforce.

An update quickly on the Winspear in Edmonton. Our government provided the Francis Winspear Centre for Music \$12.8 million for the third phase of its renovation expansion project. This facility provides educational programming for children of all ages, currently hosts more than 150 concerts a year. This will exponentially increase with the additional music hall, classrooms, other spaces.

The Chair: MLA Hayter, you caught my attention.

Ms Hayter: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm going to go back to where I left off. I appreciate that the minister has shared that they are creating an Alberta-made action plan to end gender-based violence. I've also heard about the women's shelter renewal project. I'm wondering how much the creation of this action plan is going to cost Albertans. Is it a redo, a duplication of past recommendations? Which line item is it? And are they using the federal gender-based violence national action plan to fund this?

You know, second-stage shelters, which provide longer term housing for women who have left emergency shelters but are not ready to live independently, have seen fewer resources than emergency shelters. So I'm wondering: what specific portion of the ministry's funding is allocated to second-stage shelters? And why doesn't the business plan include metrics tracking this crucial transitional service?

Rural and remote communities have particularly significant gaps in shelter services, with some women having to travel hundreds of kilometres to find safety. How much of the minister's shelter funding is specifically targeted to addressing service gaps in rural and remote areas?

Statistics show that women with disabilities experience violence at significantly higher rates, yet many shelters lack appropriate accessibility features. So I'm wondering: what specific investments is the minister making to ensure shelters are fully accessible to women with disabilities?

At the current rate of progress shown in the business plan, it would take decades to see meaningful reduction in violence. Does the minister acknowledge that her current approach isn't working, and if so, why isn't there more substantial budget reallocation to address this failure? What specific evidence or research did the ministry use to determine that this level of funding would be sufficient to make meaningful progress in eliminating gender-based violence in Alberta?

12:05

I'm now going to move on to another topic. I know that while the business plan mentions supporting and engaging with members of the 2SLGBTQIA-plus community as objective 2.5, there are no specific budget allocation or program details provided. I'm hoping that the minister through you, Chair, could explain exactly what concrete actions on funding are being dedicated to this objective in 2025-2026. I'd like to ask the minister how her department responds to the contradiction between her mandate to promote inclusive communities and increase in banning of diverse books and pride flags and crosswalks. Does the minister believe these restrictions align with her ministry's vision?

Through you, Mr. Chair, the budget shows that the community initiatives program has been cut by \$2 million this year. Many 2SLGBTQIA-plus organizations rely on this funding. Can the minister explain through you, Chair, why this program was targeted for cuts and why it's simultaneously claiming to support these communities?

I'd like to know what specific metrics the minister is using to evaluate whether her department is successfully supporting and engaging with members of the 2SLGBTQIA-plus community, as stated in the business plan. How does she measure success in this area? The minister's business plan talks about vibrant inclusive communities, but many 2SLGBTQIA-plus Albertans report feeling increasingly excluded. Has the minister consulted with these communities about their needs? If so, how is it reflected in this budget?

Now through you, Chair, I'd like to follow up on some concerning underspending we have seen in the status of women portfolio. Once again looking at page 54 of the estimates, only \$8.02 million of the budget of the \$19.738 million was actually spent in 2024-2025. That's a massive 60 per cent underspent. Through you, Chair, I'd like specific details on which exact projects or programs that were in Budget 2024 did not get implemented. Or were they delayed? Were all the scholarships that were allocated in the budget actually awarded to women? If not, how many went unawarded, and why?

If all of the ministries are responsible for women, as stated earlier, what is this ministry doing to advocate for women and ensuring that they are applying a gender-based lens? Who is accountable for the metrics, the objectives, and the outcomes? Were any gender-based initiatives that were funded on paper not actually implemented?

Through you, Chair, Albertans deserve to know whether this budget represents a genuine commitment to women's issues. Or is it simply an accounting exercise, where large portions of the funds are never actually deployed? This pattern of significant underspending raises serious questions about whether the status of women office is being set up to succeed or whether it's primarily window dressing.

I will now cede my time to the minister, my three seconds of time.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Over to you, Minister, to respond.

Ms Fir: Well, thank you. I want to reiterate about the gender-based violence strategy that it's going to co-ordinate the millions of dollars invested to ensure that we fill in gaps and make sure services are available when and where they're needed. I encourage the member to watch for that strategy. In terms of the full amount spent and transfers, that will be addressed in supplementary estimates.

I want to talk a little bit about funding as it relates to sexual assault centre funding. I would encourage the members to direct questions to the Minister of Children and Family Services on specific grants within his ministry and the increased funding being provided for sexual assault centres across the province. Again, I can share with the member that my ministry has led the development of this 10-year strategy on gender-based violence, which of course includes sexual violence. I would like to reiterate that Budget 2025 invests \$19.8 million to support this strategy in addition to the millions of investments from other ministries across government. I look forward, again, to releasing the strategy soon.

Moving over to questions and comments as it relates to the 2SLGBTQQA-plus community. I've met with several members of the communities and leaders from across Alberta to listen and learn since I've been in this position, and I look forward to continuing that work to ensure Alberta remains the best place to live and work. I mentioned, I believe in my introductory comments, that we've recently launched the 2SLGBTQQA-plus online resource hub, which provides easy access to programs and services and information about the initiatives across government that support the 2SLGBTQQA-plus community, including information on health care supports and guidance on how Albertans can amend the sex marker on their birth record, identification card, or driver's licence. As a testament to our commitment since 2021 our government has invested more than \$26 million in programs and services that support 2SLGBTQQA-plus Albertans, including \$1.6 million in grants for the community's organizations and projects.

I also just want to give a couple of examples of other ways that we support the 2SLGBTQQA-plus community. I talked a little bit about the resource hub. I would like to touch on our Stars of Alberta awards. We have a breaking barriers, 2SLGBTQQA-plus inclusion, category. The 2024 Stars of Alberta volunteer award for breaking barriers was awarded to Coralee McIntosh. She's a long-time volunteer. Coralee is an advocate for 2SLGBTQQA-plus rights and is working to address discrimination, bullying, and mental health disparities within our community.

I also want to give just a few examples of grants for nonprofit 2SLGBTQQA-plus organizations. Edmonton PrideFest Association received \$75,000 for the 2024 Edmonton Pride Festival. The event provided a safe space for 2SLGBTQQA-plus individuals to come together, celebrate their identities, foster a sense of belonging. Another example: the Downstage Performance

Society received \$75,000 to support the Alberta premiere of *Botticelli in the Fire*. This production will address important issues, including homophobia. Another example: the Centre for Sexuality Society received \$52,649 to expand the organization's community connections program by hiring a dedicated co-ordinator and purchasing technology and equipment. The Pride Calgary Planning Committee received \$50,000 for Calgary Pride 2023, and the Grande Prairie Pride Society received \$30,000 for hosting costs for Grande Prairie Pride 2023. These are just a few examples of the work that we're doing with that community.

I just want to go back again to the gender-based violence strategy and reiterate the importance of how it will be the most comprehensive and first-of-its-kind strategy in all of Canada in terms of how comprehensive it is. It'll have over 100 actions in it, from immediate, short-term, long-term actions, and I think it's going to be an incredibly important tool to co-ordinate and . . .

The Chair: Back to the government caucus. MLA Wiebe caught my attention.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the minister for being here today. I just appreciate you spending the time with this committee and answering some of the questions that we had with regard to your part of the budget and your ministry. I really, really appreciate that. I want to thank you as well for the community grants in my community that have been provided by your ministry.

As we wrap up the discussions here, I'm just wondering if there's anything else that you would like to highlight that we haven't touched on yet, and I'd like to cede the rest of the time to you, Minister.

Ms Fir: Well, thank you very much. I would like to address just going back to some previous questions. The Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul asked about the reduction to ICIP funding in the budget. The investing in Canada infrastructure program, or ICIP, is a government of Canada program that has now ended. The budget has decreased because several projects have been completed, including the Telus World of Science aurora project in Edmonton and funding for the Glenbow Museum, which has now been fully funded but has construction still under way. I can assure the member that no projects were cancelled, and the budget will continue to decline just as a result of the projects being completed.

Our government will continue to advocate for federal programs and federal funding as it relates to, as I mentioned previously, making sure that in addition to the millions and millions we invest, we get fair federal funding as well.

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for the consideration of these estimates has concluded. We made it to the two-hour mark.

I'd like to remind committee members that we're scheduled to meet this afternoon at 3:30 to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation.

I do want to say thank you to all the members, minister for the wonderful decorum. You got all your questions out and, hopefully, most of them answered.

With that, thank you so much. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12:15 p.m.]

