



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Seniors and Housing
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, May 10, 2016
9 a.m.

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Gotfried, Richard, Calgary-Fish Creek (PC)**
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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Seniors and Housing
Hon. Lori Sigurdson, Minister
Shannon Marchand, Deputy Minister

9 a.m.

Tuesday, May 10, 2016

[Ms Goehring in the chair]

**Ministry of Seniors and Housing
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Good morning. I'd like to call this meeting to order and welcome everyone. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors and Housing for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2017.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have all MLAs introduce themselves for the record. Minister, when we get to you, please introduce the staff that are joining you at the table. I'm Nicole Goehring, MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs and chair of this committee. We'll continue, starting to my right.

Mr. Orr: Ron Orr, MLA for Lacombe-Ponoka.

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

Mr. Stier: Pat Stier, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod, substituting today for Tany Yao, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mrs. Pitt: Angela Pitt, MLA for Airdrie.

Mr. Gill: Prab Gill, MLA for Calgary-Greenway.

Mr. Gotfried: Richard Gotfried, MLA, Calgary-Fish Creek.

Dr. Swann: Good morning. David Swann, Calgary-Mountain View.

Ms Sigurdson: Good morning. Lori Sigurdson. I'm the Minister of Seniors and Housing and the MLA for Edmonton-Riverview. With me today is Mike Leathwood. He's the assistant deputy minister of the housing division. The deputy minister, Shannon Marchand, is to my right, and Darren Baptista, the senior financial officer, is to the further right.

Ms McKittrick: Annie McKittrick, MLA, Sherwood Park.

Mr. Hinkley: Good morning. Bruce Hinkley, Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Malkinson: Brian Malkinson, MLA for Calgary-Currie, substituting for Karen McPherson.

Ms Luff: Robyn Luff, Calgary-East.

Ms Drever: Deborah Drever, MLA for Calgary-Bow.

Mr. Westhead: Cameron Westhead, MLA for Banff-Cochrane.

Mr. Horne: Trevor Horne, MLA for Spruce Grove-St. Albert.

Mr. Shepherd: David Shepherd, MLA, Edmonton-Centre.

The Chair: Thank you.

I wish to note for the record that we have the following substitutes: Mr. Gotfried for Mr. Rodney, Mr. Malkinson for Ms McPherson, and Mr. Gill for Ms Jansen.

Please note that the microphones are being operated by *Hansard*, and we'd ask that BlackBerrys, iPhones, et cetera, be turned off or set to silent or vibrate and not placed on the table as they may interfere with the audiofeed.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. Before we proceed with consideration of the main estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing, I would like to review briefly the standing orders

governing the speaking rotation. As provided for in Standing Order 59.01(6), the rotation is as follows. The minister or the member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf may make opening comments not to exceed 10 minutes. For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the member of the third party, if any, and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of any other party represented in the Assembly or any independent members and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes private members of the government caucus and the minister may speak. For the time remaining, we will follow the same rotation just outlined to the extent possible; however, the speaking times are reduced to five minutes as set out in Standing Order 59.02(1)(c).

Members may speak more than once; however, speaking times for the first rotation are limited to 10 minutes at any one time. A minister and a member may combine their time for a total of 20 minutes. For the final rotation, with speaking times of five minutes, once again a minister and a member may combine their speaking time for a maximum total of 10 minutes. Discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not the speaking time is combined. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their speech if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time.

If members have any questions regarding the speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send a note or speak directly with either the chair or the committee clerk about this process.

Three hours have been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having the break?

Mr. Gotfried: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

As someone opposes this break, we will not be having the break at the midway point.

Committee members, ministers, and other members who are not committee members may participate; however, only a committee member or an official substitute for a committee member may introduce an amendment during a committee's review of the estimates.

Ministry officials may be present, and at the direction of the minister officials from the ministry may address the committee. Ministry staff seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery area. Members' staff may be present and, space permitting, may sit at the table or behind their members along the committee room wall. Members have priority for seating at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and we will adjourn. Otherwise, we will adjourn today at 12 o'clock.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and the clock 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.

Again I will remind all meeting participants to address their questions and responses through the chair and not directly to one another.

The vote on the estimates is deferred until consideration of all ministry estimates has concluded and will occur in Committee of Supply on May 17, 2016.

If there are amendments, an amendment to the estimates cannot seek to increase the amount of the estimates being considered, change the destination of a grant, or change the destination or purpose of a subsidy. An amendment may be proposed to reduce an estimate, but the amendment cannot propose to reduce the estimate by its full amount. The vote on amendments is deferred until Committee of Supply convenes on May 17, 2016. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. Twenty copies of amendments must be provided at the meeting for committee members and staff, with the original to the committee clerk.

I will now invite the Minister of Seniors and Housing to begin her opening remarks. You have 10 minutes.

Ms Sigurdson: Madam Chair, I'm just wondering if I can propose an alternative to the no-break piece. Is that possible?

The Chair: No.

Ms Sigurdson: We can't add it at the end? I just know that my body will probably need a break.

The Chair: No, unfortunately. Sorry, Minister.

Ms Sigurdson: All right.

Thank you, Madam Chair. It's my pleasure to present the 2016-2017 estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. I was honoured by my appointment as minister earlier this year. My new role fits well with my background in social work. Over my career I've been involved with several organizations that support seniors and vulnerable Albertans. I'm thankful that the Premier renamed the ministry Seniors and Housing. The name more accurately reflects the work of the ministry. The new name also makes the ministry's role more clear to Albertans, that Seniors and Housing provides a wide range of supports from seniors' benefit programs to safe and affordable housing.

My ministry's budget, notably the \$1.2 billion investment over five years into seniors and housing, will move Alberta forward. This investment doesn't just build homes and facilities; it will also create jobs locally and across the province. Budget 2016 protects programs and services for the most vulnerable Albertans. It promotes job creation and economic diversification in our province to combat the effects of low oil prices through capital investments in infrastructure.

Most of my ministry's \$650 million operating budget goes to financial support for lower income seniors and housing supports for low-income Albertans. My ministry's housing programs assist approximately 119,000 Albertans, and our financial supports help approximately 150,000 lower income seniors. We have maintained and in some cases increased the funding for support programs for seniors and low-income Albertans. This means that the ministry is meeting our first objective of protecting programs and services for vulnerable Albertans.

Through the 2016 capital plan my ministry will make much-needed investments in government-owned or -supported social housing units. We will invest \$1.2 billion over the next five years on capital projects to renew aging housing facilities, build new homes for Albertans, and preserve and maintain social housing across Alberta. That's significantly more than has been invested in the last many years. In fact, the previous government left us with a \$1 billion backlog of deferred maintenance.

But what does that \$1.2 billion investment mean? It means more safe and secure homes, affordable homes, homes that are actually accessible so that seniors can age independently and with dignity. This significant capital investment will also help create jobs in the

construction industry, one sector that has been hit by the current economic slowdown. Social housing is needed across the province. The local construction workers and contractors will benefit from these renewal projects and new builds.

I would like to get more into the specifics about my ministry's estimates. The Ministry of Seniors and Housing will allocate more than \$350 million in seniors' services for financial assistance for low-income seniors and grants for senior-friendly initiatives. More than \$22 million is allocated to support low-income seniors through special-needs assistance programs. This grant program provides funding for low-income seniors who need help with personal and medical supports such as diabetic supplies or a lift chair.

9:10

When it comes to home repairs, the seniors' home adaptation and repair program, that was recently passed in the Legislature, will provide an additional option for seniors to age in community. Up to 145,000 senior households may be eligible to receive up to \$40,000 to make modifications and repairs to their homes. Home repairs and modifications will help seniors remain in their homes and maintain their independence. Adaptations like widening doorways or hallways to increase accessibility or installing walk-in tubs or noncarpeted flooring can make a big difference to a senior's independence and can be the reason they stay in their home instead of moving to another facility.

The low-interest home equity loan does not have to be paid back until the home is sold. We've added \$2 million in grants to support lower income seniors who may not be eligible for the home equity loan.

Other community grants are a final highlight under the broad category of seniors' services.

My ministry will also allocate \$2.6 million to communities and nonprofit groups to undertake age-friendly initiatives or activities to address elder abuse prevention. These community-based programs and services leverage the incredible network of seniors' advocacy groups and stakeholders in the province. I'm proud of the support we give to our partners as we all share the same goal of supporting seniors' independence and quality of life.

I'm also proud that our government will provide more than \$357 million to low-income seniors through the Alberta seniors' benefit. The Alberta seniors' benefit has two components. One component provides direct support to lower income seniors to supplement their federal old age security and guaranteed income supplement benefits. Our government will provide more than \$270 million in supplemental benefits to approximately 150,000 lower income seniors. The second component is the supplementary accommodation benefit for lower income seniors in long-term or designated continuing care. The benefit ensures seniors have a minimum of \$315 of disposable income per month once their accommodation fees are paid. My ministry will provide more than \$78 million for this benefit to more than 12,000 seniors in long-term or designated continuing care facilities. These are just a few examples of how Alberta seniors are supported by my ministry.

I will now turn to my ministry's commitments to housing supports for Albertans. Provincial programs support approximately 119,000 Albertans in 66,000 housing units throughout the province. More than a hundred local housing management bodies deliver the programs and manage the units on the provincial government's behalf. Total operating funding for housing programs will be approximately \$236 million for 2016-2017.

Of this, approximately \$166 million will be directed to housing management bodies to operate seniors' lodges, seniors' apartments, family community housing units, and units for those with special needs. This funding allows rent for low-income Albertans to be

based on 30 per cent of income or, in the case of seniors' lodges, leaves each resident a minimum of \$315 disposable income per month once food and rent are paid. Collectively, housing management bodies will receive a needed 2 per cent increase to their operating budgets after having this funding frozen. This is a much-needed increase as housing management bodies have struggled to keep up with the demands of rising costs.

My ministry will also provide more than \$66 million to subsidize rents for more than 11,000 low-income households. The rent subsidies pay the difference between 30 per cent of household income and the rent in private accommodation. The \$66 million represents a \$2 million boost for the rent assistance program. That boost will put more Albertans into homes.

One of the most significant pieces in the budget is the \$1.2 billion this government is investing in social housing over the next five years. This is a dramatic increase from what's been invested in the past few years, and it is sorely needed and long overdue. We need to start addressing the \$1 billion backlog of maintenance and repairs I mentioned earlier. We need to recognize that most housing units are at least 30 years old, and in the case of seniors' lodges many are 40 or more years old.

We need to recognize that more housing units are required to address the needs of 15,000 households currently on wait-lists for affordable housing. We will be focusing our efforts on several shovel-ready projects, the renewal and renovation of existing units so that we protect our housing assets for the future, and building a clear plan for how and where we construct new units.

We'll also be working on new programs for off-reserve housing for Alberta's indigenous people, and we'll be working on new projects that will support homeless and specialized populations.

There's a lot of work to do, but ministry staff are ready for the challenge. More Albertans will be housed in safe and affordable homes because of the significant capital investment to build housing and renew aging facilities.

My ministry will also provide \$30 million this year for the ongoing fire sprinkler and safety system installation in seniors' lodges and continuing care facilities. These facilities were built before 1990, when sprinklers became mandatory under Alberta's building code. By 2018 more than a hundred government-owned or -supported facilities will have modern fire suppression and safety systems. This continued investment ensures our seniors can feel safe and secure in their homes.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. As I've outlined, the majority of the ministry's spending provides financial or housing support for low-income seniors and other vulnerable Albertans. I look forward to answering your questions and hearing your comments going forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Would you like the timer to be set for 20-minute intervals so that you are aware of the time, or would you prefer to let the full hour flow without interruption?

Mr. Stier: The full hour, Madam Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Absolutely. Are you going to be going back and forth with the minister?

Mr. Stier: As long as the minister is okay with back and forth, I would prefer that, please.

The Chair: Minister, are you open to going back and forth?

Ms Sigurdson: Sure. Yes.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Stier: All right. Well, thank you, and good morning, everyone. My name is Pat Stier, and I'm the Member for Livingstone-Macleod. I want to thank all those that have attended here today and thank the minister especially. It's a new file for her but not a new file with her history.

I'm pleased to be here today on behalf of our Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, who has faced a severe tragedy in his riding. There are extreme challenges there today, so I'm happy to be able to fill in for him. It's obviously a busy time for everyone here, Minister, I think, and with the displacement of all those people who have fled the wildfires in Fort McMurray and the northern regions of our province, I'm sure that all of our thoughts and prayers are with the evacuees and all of the first responders, emergency responders, et cetera, and the brave men and women who are out there on the front lines.

Today I have a lot of ground to cover, and there are a lot of questions, as there always are in estimates. If I move along a little quickly and have to interject during one of your responses, please don't take any kind of offence to that. It's simply that there's a lot of material we would like to cover, and if I've gotten the information that I need already, then I may just suddenly jump in and say: can we move on now? If at the end we have some kinds of questions that we feel are very pertinent, Madam Chair, I'd like to ask for responses in writing in a more condensed fashion if I perceive that to be the case.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Stier: If that's okay, then I'd like to get started. What we've done here is organized ourselves, and we'd like to start with the business plan if we could. We think that's the vital component to any ministry. It kind of outlines how money is spent in a budget and what the direction is and why we're spending the money. If I could, I'd like to start with the business plan on page 113. You know, there's a quote in there that I'd like to state here quickly, and it's the one that comes in around the early part of the strategic context. There's a different environment here, and you state:

The effects of low global oil and gas commodity prices are being felt in communities throughout the province and as the labour market weakens, more people are relying on housing and income support programs provided by Seniors and Housing.

I'd like to start out with: can you tell us what you perceive those actual effects to be, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, in terms of the affordable housing file that we're responsible for in Seniors and Housing, people have lost their jobs; therefore, they don't have an income and are not able to access the private market, and that may force some people into needing supports in affordable housing. You know, certainly, people not working don't have the income to provide for rent. And that applies to seniors. Many seniors are still working and in the job market, that changes quite a bit.

Also, it has come down somewhat because of the economic downturn, but rents are high in Alberta, certainly in the urban areas. Calgary is a good example. It's very expensive to own a home or to rent there. Again, that's another reason why we would be providing a sort of affordable housing program. Briefly that's a few things.

9:20

Mr. Stier: Okay. Thank you.

I'd just like to maybe elaborate. I might combine a couple of quick questions due to the subject and the degree of information you're providing, which is great. Could you provide us with an overview of what increases you may have seen in that regard, then, and which programs with those increases are being most utilized?

Ms Sigurdson: I just want to say that when we became government last May, we inherited, obviously, the situation that was here in Alberta. We have approximately 15,000 households on wait-lists for affordable housing, and that's only growing. I mean, it certainly has been brought up to me in question period and other times that there are sometimes units out there that are for affordable housing, but they're not livable anymore because of the billion dollars in deferred maintenance that we also inherited. So, of course, an investment to make sure that those housing units are livable and that people can be in them is very important.

You know, we inherited a system that hadn't been preserved and maintained for some time. We have 108 housing management bodies across the province providing affordable housing, seniors' housing. They haven't had an increase since 2013, and their operating budget costs have gone up.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Yes. Thank you.

Again, though, back to the low oil and gas commodity prices. I just want to redirect a question back to that. Can you talk about how some of the seniors perhaps are then – or what is the degree of difficulty caused directly by the hard price of oil? Is it just a lack of funding that you're trying to establish in your point, then?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, I think some seniors are continuing to work, and they may have lost their jobs. Certainly, over the years we have more and more people who have kind of precarious employment, which gets worse. They don't have pensions, so then they're vulnerable, and they don't have accommodations. Some of the investments that seniors may have had, you know, aren't getting the return that they had hoped for and that they planned for in their retirement. So then their incomes are lower; therefore, they need some support with housing.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Thank you.

Just moving along in that same vein, Albertans now, of course, and seniors especially are worried about the potential of the carbon tax. Can you perhaps enlighten us? Have you done an assessment on how your ministry or the seniors themselves will be affected by this new carbon tax that's coming up, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Sure. That's fine. The carbon levy is a government-wide initiative that's aimed at lowering Alberta's greenhouse gas emissions, and it's part of our climate leadership adjustment plan. A rebate will protect lower and middle-income Albertans, including seniors, from the higher costs resulting from the carbon levy. Certainly, in Seniors and Housing we're working with seniors to make sure that they understand this program. You know, seniors will receive rebates if they're in that low-income category.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Minister, if I could redirect you on that, though, I asked you if you've done an assessment on how much this tax will affect them. How much will they be paying if they're seniors, then? Do you have any assessment figures on that? Not the rebates.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, actually, what I know about seniors is that oftentimes they don't have a big footprint – right? – in carbon use, so they may actually be ahead of the game in sort of our assessment of the cost that seniors have for their housing or transportation.

Certainly, the rebates come in in January and the levy doesn't come in until April, so they're paid ahead of time to counteract any kind of hardship it might cause them.

Mr. Stier: Oh, I see. So there is no formal assessment or information available with respect to that as of yet from the department on how this may affect your residents?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, working with Environment and Parks, you know, and our whole government, we've looked at income levels across the board. Seniors have been included in that. I think we've made some really important decisions that will support low-income seniors. Yes. We've done that assessment.

Mr. Stier: Okay. It would be interesting to perhaps receive some written material on that for the benefit of the committee, just to see how those figures have been arrived at.

Ms Sigurdson: Sure. I can give you the specifics.

Mr. Stier: Thank you very much.

Now moving on if I could in the business plan, page 114, under strategic context, under affordable housing, you state that your ministry "will continue to support access to affordable housing options for families and individuals." Can you provide us with a high-level overview of some of those options that the ministry provides, a very high level? I know it is a fairly large portfolio, and there are a bunch of different things that perhaps the committee could be informed about there, please.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Certainly, there is community housing. I guess maybe I can give you the example of Capital Region Housing, that provides low-income housing for many Edmontonians here in Alberta. So there are community housing facilities. There are lodges across the province. Plus, there are sort of unique organizations that we work with, partners in the community, municipalities. I could mention Habitat for Humanity, for example. We support them significantly, and they create home ownership paths for people with low incomes. Certainly, the government works very well with them.

We also have a rent supplement program. You know, that would actually be either to a renter or to a landlord that we would supplement so that people have accommodation.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Thank you for that.

Just to expand on that a little further, then, you mentioned in your delivery earlier with respect to the building of new housing and the maintenance of the older housing units. I'm very familiar with that. You know, a lot of those units throughout Alberta, especially in small towns, were built in the '60s and '70s and don't meet code and so on and so forth. I think we've all witnessed that as MLAs. Do you have, firstly, some numbers with respect to how many units you have that are listed as needing those high levels of maintenance and renewal, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I'll say that the large figure, the billion dollars in deferred maintenance, is a significant amount. We're just looking for the exact number.

Mr. Stier: That's fair.

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, you know, the seniors' lodges, as I said and you commented on: many aren't up to code; for example, for the sprinkler systems, the fire safety features, that are part of our code since 1990. Of course, our government is investing \$30 million this year alone to get to all those facilities. We know that

there are about a hundred of those seniors' facilities that will be upgraded to address code.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Does that include some of these private and community-owned units as well? Is that combined with the others, or how does that break out, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes and no. Some are and some aren't. It depends on whether we are supporting them as social housing. There are certainly some private facilities that aren't supported by government, so those would not be receiving funding.

Mr. Stier: Okay. I gather it would possibly be on page 208 of the budget itself. I'm just wondering where some of those items might be found. Is there a line item that covers this topic overall, then, please?

Ms Sigurdson: I'll just be one moment.

Mr. Stier: That's fine. Thank you.

Ms Sigurdson: It's on the Alberta Social Housing Corporation's statement of operations, certainly, the capital investment in family community housing or seniors' community housing. The 2016-17 estimate for family housing is \$62,491,000 and for seniors' housing is \$196,483,000.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Thank you for those figures.

I'm just wondering what line number that would apply to in the budget.

Ms Sigurdson: It's on page 214, I understand, in the budget, change in capital assets.

Mr. Stier: Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: Family and seniors' community housing.

9:30

Mr. Stier: Okay. Thank you very much. I appreciate the work there.

New housing projects, then. Does your ministry have a prioritized infrastructure spending list for new housing projects, and if so, could we be enlightened on that? If not, will you commit to creating one today here in the committee?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we're certainly working with our partners, municipalities, nonprofit agencies, and housing management bodies across the province to look at projects. We're assessing them in terms of shovel ready, you know, the age of the facility – as I said, we have a lot of old stock – making sure of the condition of the facility and the needs in that community. Some communities are maintaining things well. For others it's more challenging, and sort of the organizational capacity, too, to go forward in these. There are many factors that are involved. We're assessing that with all the groups that we're working with.

Mr. Stier: Okay. I guess, then, from that perspective what I see is that you have two or three different approaches you have to follow, whether it's the existing or whether it's new. Would it be fair to say that you're looking at each community, how each one of those would be considered as a priority for that community, whether it's a renewal or a maintenance or a new? Would that be fair?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. That's a fair assessment.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Have you got, with respect to that last answer you gave me – I need a little clarity for myself. I may have missed it. Do you have on the housing maintenance and renewal, then – the first question I posed earlier was about new housing project priorities. Do you have a list overall, then, of priorities for the maintenance and renewal separately?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Certainly, we are aware of, you know, concerns in different communities about the housing stock and the state of it. You know, I have already identified very clearly that our government is committed to making sure that all the seniors' lodges have the sprinkler systems and the fire safety features. We're certainly consulting with all of the areas, and we have a facility consultation report that we assess. We're working with all those communities to determine what is most needed, looking at priorities.

Mr. Stier: Okay. So we're still, even though the ministry has existed for some time in one form or another, waiting to get an assessment and a list, then. It seems surprising that we wouldn't have a lot of that work already accomplished to some degree. With your new ministry I realize there would be some, perhaps, change in policy and direction, but I would assume that somewhere there would have to be some sort of an idea of a list of what's there in terms of an inventory, no?

Ms Sigurdson: We do. We do have a lot of understanding of what the communities are experiencing. As you said, we have existed for some time, so we do know that, but things shift and change all the time. It's not like it's a, you know, thing that doesn't – all of a sudden there may be a community that needs something else due to specific things. We do have some good information, but we're still continuing to make sure that we understand what the priorities are, and I've sort of given you the guidelines for that previously.

Mr. Stier: Yes. Thank you. I only say that in response to years I've spent here and talked about, as an example, the Transportation file where they have a rehab and construction list projected for three years. It's kind of organic. It does move, but they do have a published list. That's what I'm asking of you today. Thank you for that.

Okay. Moving on. I'd like to talk to something that you mentioned earlier, and it's in the hearts and minds of a lot of Albertans, and that has to do with elder abuse, of course. On the business plan, page 115, in key strategy 1.1 your business plan commits to "increase Albertans' awareness of elder abuse and support coordinated community response models that address and prevent elder abuse." We've noticed that there is not a lot there as far as a performance measure in the business plan for monitoring elder abuse. There's only a very weak performance indicator, which is about providing awareness training to the providers. Can you explain why you don't have stronger measures and more information on that in the business plan at this time, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, since 2012, you know, the ministry has provided 21 presentations to seniors and service providers to raise awareness about elder abuse and provide information about elder abuse resources. The way the program works is not government providing support services, but we actually have a grant system where we support nonprofit organizations and municipalities. This is part of the training that we provide to increase that awareness. If you're thinking about an indicator in terms of, you know, prevention of a specific prevalence in a particular community, those would be the indicators that that particular municipality would have

more so than us. We are really very much sort of a larger umbrella organization that supports them with funding.

Mr. Stier: Yet, Minister, if I may say, as an overseer of a program, if I could call it that – I'm not sure of the right words – wouldn't one think that there should be some sort of a direction and a monitoring and some sort of more hands-on than just dealing with the municipalities and letting them handle it? That sort of sounds like what you just said. You know, I apologize if I haven't put it adequately enough, but it would seem that the ministry should have some sort of standards that they want municipalities to maintain and live up to and some sort of checks and balances in the system.

Ms Sigurdson: Right. Well, I guess I want to just talk sort of in general about awareness in Canada regarding elder abuse. If I can do a bit of a history lesson, you know, sexual abuse didn't occur until the '60s. Of course, it occurred much earlier. Elder abuse: we've known about it and we've certainly invested money and put programs forward, but we're still learning, and we really don't even have a prevalence number for Canada. You know, other provinces, their programs are fairly recent in development, so this is a time of sort of learning and understanding that. I agree with you. I would love to have harder numbers that we can do, but we're still developing that. Certainly, I appreciate your critique because that was my critique when I looked at this myself.

Mr. Stier: Very good.

Ms Sigurdson: It's just that we're sort of at a different place than many other kinds of, you know, social ills that we've known in our society for many years, and that is something that I certainly am committed to working on with my ministry and with my other provincial counterparts.

Mr. Stier: Okay. So with the budget, is there a part in the budget itself where some dollars are directed towards that particular need? If so, can you just highlight it for me?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Line 2.4. It says Seniors Community Grants.

Mr. Stier: Correct.

Ms Sigurdson: We have \$2,607,000, and \$1 million of that is allocated to elder abuse programs.

Mr. Stier: Really?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah.

Mr. Stier: Okay. That's interesting.

Just to go on from this money side of it, then, it stems, as you said, from cultures and things. In many cases there are underlying problems which have to be addressed, of course. We've called in the House many times over the past term and a half, or term and a third that I've been involved in so far, for having an independent Seniors' Advocate, similar to the Child and Youth Advocate. The office would maintain its own internal data and provide detailed reports, perhaps like the Auditor General's type of reports, on the seriousness of the situation. I do know that you do have a Seniors Advisory Council, which is more or less an internal one, but we're just wondering – there's a bit of change in the amount of money being spent in some of these grants for senior communities and so on and so forth. We're just wondering if it wouldn't be best with the changes in dollars and so on to have an independent Seniors' Advocate. Do you have something that you're thinking of in looking at that?

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you. That's an important question. We do have a Seniors' Advocate office right now, but, as you say, it's not an independent office. To be quite frank with you, the reason we are not moving to an independent office right now has to do with that it costs \$1 million right now for that office; it costs \$10 million if it's independent. It is a challenge right now for us to make that kind of investment.

We know that the Seniors' Advocate did answer, like, 550 Albertans' concerns. We are receiving them and following up and supporting seniors in Alberta through the current system, and certainly we want to make sure that every senior has that opportunity to express their concerns. I believe the system is working well right now. We are actually in the process of recruitment because that position is vacant. In the interim the Health Advocate office is responding to them, but it is specific to seniors, and certainly the staff are supporting with specific information for seniors. These aren't Health people. The recruitment process is under way right now.

9:40

Mr. Stier: Okay. Thank you.

It's been drawn to my attention that on page 208, line 2.4, it refers to seniors community grants there. It looks like there's almost a \$2 million change from last year's actual. Can you explain that one? I know we were just talking about community expenditures a moment ago with the other line number.

Ms Sigurdson: That's from '14-15. It is consistent with '15-16. It's \$2.607 million. That's the same. But that was the year before we were government.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Yet that department existed at \$4.3 million. Do you have any idea from your department or your staff why the big change? That's a 50 per cent change in that figure.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I understand that it was a reallocation of those funds to other priority areas, seniors' benefits. That was a shift in the previous budget.

Mr. Stier: Do you see that as being something to investigate, perhaps, from your perspective? That's a 50 per cent change and not a lot of information regarding it so far here today. Does that cause you some concern?

Ms Sigurdson: I know that what we're doing is consistent with the previous year, and certainly supporting those kinds of elder abuse programs and other programs that we support is important. I mean, my understanding from my deputy minister is that those funds were allocated to an area that was needed. I can look further into that.

Mr. Stier: I think we'd appreciate that, getting some response back in writing on that. We're talking about the '14-15 actual at \$4.3 million, and the budget and forecast and estimate is remaining the same as last year at \$2.6 million. That's a significant amount, Minister.

Ms Sigurdson: You know, if I could, we just got a note saying that actually in '14-15 the budget didn't change, but it was overexpended. There were some extraordinary expenses for shelters.

Mr. Stier: It sounds like we need more information, so if we could get that detail, that would be fine. Thank you very much.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That's fine.

Mr. Stier: Let's go on, then. I'm looking still at the business plan, page 115. Key strategy 1.3 talks about providing "individual and community-based supports that empower seniors to remain independent and fully participate in their chosen communities." There's a lot here. Again, we're looking there and we don't see a lot of performance measures or how that's being monitored, how that's rolled out. Do you have any information to shed some light on that for us today, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, certainly, this has to do with the various programs that we offer, like the Alberta seniors' benefit, the seniors' accommodation benefit, seniors' property tax deferral program, special-needs assistance program, and our recently announced seniors' home adaptation and repair program. These are all programs that support seniors to stay in their communities close to their families and their friends that they've known for years. We want to do our best to make sure that they stay in their communities, wherever they are.

Mr. Stier: Again, the question was more towards the measuring of how that's doing and the monitoring of it. Do you have anything with relation to that?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, we know that we support I think it's about 150,000 seniors on the Alberta seniors' benefit. You know, there's a significant difference that we make in seniors' lives every day.

Mr. Stier: I guess. Yeah. This goes to the point I was making earlier. When you're overseeing something, being able to monitor and measure what's going on will make sure that your systems you're putting in place and your strategies are effective and they're addressing the needs that are there.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, 1(b), seniors' income relative to population: you're looking at the well-being of this population. You're comparing them. So those indicators do give us some indication. Seniors' life satisfaction: percentage of Alberta seniors reporting life satisfaction. These are some indicators that do talk about quality of life.

Mr. Stier: Okay. All right. I won't debate that. Some of those things are so vague for me. A lot of times when we're working with things, we're hoping for more detail, but I guess in this context that's a fair statement.

Moving on, then, on the same page key strategy 1.4 states, "Support Health in the creation of 2,000 public long-term care spaces over the next four years." This is a topic that's been around the Assembly for a while, possibly dealt with last fall a bit and in previous years, too, of course. I'm just wondering where we're at on that target. Are there some performance measures we can find about that, indicators? Do you have a prioritized list for this, et cetera?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, the Ministry of Seniors and Housing has contributed many needed supportive living spaces through the affordable supportive living initiative over the years. Now that program, also known as ASLI, has been moved to Alberta Health. So they are in a most recent – well, this is the budget that we presented. That program is now the responsibility of Health. We're working with Health regarding that. There are dozens of ongoing projects that will deliver needed care and spaces to Albertans across the province. Health is the lead ministry in that, so I'd just recommend you speak with them.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Sorry. I got misdirected for a second by the chair. I guess we've got 30 minutes left.

So you're saying that the bulk of that information is going to be the responsibility of Health to respond to.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Health has the responsibility now for all of the ASLI program, and they are facilitating that and determining, you know, the numbers that you're asking about regarding the beds.

Mr. Stier: Okay. So just out of curiosity, if I may, you know, from a management point of view – it's in your business plan yet, right? I'm just a little unclear about that. Was the business plan written before the changeover, then?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we continue to support Health. We do, you know, planning with them regarding supportive living and also the supplemental accommodation benefit for individuals we're involved with. There is some crossministerial work, but certainly the responsibility is largely with Health.

Mr. Stier: Okay. All right. Well, thank you for that. So the budgeting and prioritized lists, all of that: we should be focusing on Health for those numbers.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Stier: All right. Fair enough.

Let's move on, then. I'm going to the business plan now. We're moving along, actually, to the Alberta Housing Act, page 116 of the business plan, and reviewing the regulations under the Alberta Housing Act and so on and so forth. A few questions here. Maybe this will help by putting these questions together a little bit. It's a strategy to review these regulations, you know, with us in government and the public. Sometimes regulations are done, and we don't get a chance to be involved or debate regulations in the House. So curiosity is always there. What's going to happen? How is that going to roll out? What regulations are we going to be reviewing? Do you have a timeline, some costs associated with that review, and will it be only for the regulations which have sunset clauses? How is that all going to work?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the regulations as they stand expire at the end of March 2017, so there is certainly a fairly tight timeline in terms of looking at those. Certainly, we are planning to make sure that we talk to stakeholder groups that are impacted by that. We've already, you know, begun. In my meetings with different housing management bodies across Alberta they've brought up, you know, concerns, and they'd like that changed. Absolutely we want to include their input. Some of the regulations are the housing accommodation tenancies regulations, lodge assistance program regulations, the management body operation and administration regulations, rent supplement regulations, social housing accommodation regulations. Those are some of the specific regulations expiring at the end of March 2017.

9:50

Mr. Stier: Okay. Well, thank you for that.

I'm just wondering: will any of the committees with the Assembly be involved in some of the results of the consultations on some of those regulatory changes that are going to be anticipated so that the public can know that another body is reviewing that?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I'm in conversation with my government colleagues, and certainly we will have a plan going forward. That's still in the works currently.

Mr. Stier: Okay. So not necessarily is it that the committee work may be done like we see on other matters that get controversial like that. So far you don't anticipate any committee participation?

Ms Sigurdson: It may be. I just can't say definitively right now, but certainly we'll be discussing that.

Mr. Stier: Okay. So in key strategy 2.3 it talks about the strategy to collaborate with various bodies and housing providers and so on and so forth. You've touched on that a little bit in the question just a moment ago. Will this be done through the Alberta Senior Citizens' Housing Association? Just how do you plan to collaborate to create some extra capacity in this system, and what might be the costs of that collaboration, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, you know, with the seniors' housing repair and adaptation program we've already had some consultations with various stakeholders across the province, with seniors' organizations that would be impacted by that, so I feel like I'm already developing a good relationship with many of them. Certainly, we'll work with any groups that are representative of seniors' groups, with ASCHA. There are all these acronyms. It's hard to pull them out. I mean, it's very important to our ministry, our government that we make sure that we're hearing from stakeholders. For this specific consultation I think we're estimating it would be – if I'm understanding your question right, it's sort of just about the cost of these consultations that are ongoing. That's just part of our ongoing business, and it's in line 4.1, program planning and delivery, under operating. So that is part of that.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

All right. Let's move on again. Now we're actually going to get into the budget and go to the estimates themselves. On page 208, operating expense, we're looking at line item 1.1: \$663,000, same as last year. Under that budget item I notice that the deputy minister's office, strategic services, and communications have all endeavoured to find savings, yet the minister's office, line item 1.1, is the only department unable to find cost savings. Are there any comments that you can give us with respect to that, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, until very recently it was a combined ministry office with the Minister of Health, and now we have a stand-alone Ministry of Seniors and Housing. Although our budget didn't go up, it wasn't cut, and that was really just to make sure that we had a fully functioning minister's office because we do have a separate minister.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Fair enough.

On page 208 again, operating expense, line 2.1, program planning and delivery: 7 and a half million dollars, a decrease of about \$200,000 from the previous year. What savings were found to make this decrease happen? Was this a program cut of some sort? What did we see?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, really, this was to do with, I think, being fiscally prudent regarding staffing costs. Some vacancies were left open longer and, in addition, just some efficiencies around supplies and services. I mean, obviously, our ministry wants to make sure that we reduce costs. We've been asked by the Minister of Finance to find efficiencies, so we are wanting to do our part to make sure that we are indeed doing our best to make really important fiscally prudent decisions.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Point well taken.

Again on page 208, line 2.2, special-needs assistance grants for seniors: \$22.4 million, a decrease of \$2 million from last year. This seems to have been decreasing by a couple of million dollars every year under your current government now. Can you explain why this has decreased by this amount in the past year and a half?

Ms Sigurdson: It's a change to the special-needs assistance grants of \$2 million, as you say, and that has actually moved directly over to the seniors' home adaptation and repair program. That is a specific program that is somewhat expanded compared to what seniors could receive from the special-needs assistance program. The money was just transferred to another specific program to help people age in their communities. That's what happened there. That money was reallocated.

Mr. Stier: Fair enough. Okay.

Then on the same page, line 2.4: \$2.6 million, same as the previous year. It's remained kind of stable for community organizations. Can you tell us a bit more about where it's going, what type of funding is going out for what kinds of projects, and how you determine who gets that funding? There are a lot of communities all over Alberta. I'm just wondering about how that is dealt with.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, again, as I said before, a million dollars of that is for elder abuse grants, but in general these community grants provide funding for seniors' abuse shelters, support for housing, registries for seniors, funding to support research related to seniors and aging, funding of co-ordinated community response grants to address and prevent elder abuse. Organizations like the Seniors Association of Greater Edmonton, SAGE, and Kerby in Calgary received funding. So those kinds of organizations receive this funding.

Mr. Stier: Okay. I'm familiar with the Kerby Centre. They do good work there.

Okay. I'd like to move on, then, if I could, to line 3.1 on the same page: \$8.3 million, a decrease of \$200,000 from the previous year. Is there something that you can mention that would stand out with that decrease, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Again, it is similar to just our being careful regarding supplies and services costs and a reduction in staffing costs.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Thank you for that.

Then we move on to line item 3.1 on page 208: \$78 million, an increase of \$15 million from the '14-15 actual.

Ms Sigurdson: I'm sorry. Where is it again?

Mr. Stier: Just one moment, please. I think I'm on a different – let's just pass on that one. We may have to come back to it to find that one. Sorry.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay.

Mr. Stier: Let's move to housing, then, page 208, line 4.1. It's \$12 million, a decrease of \$300,000 from the previous year. Again, can you give us any detail on that change, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Again it has to do with staffing and, you know, being very careful with the supplies and services costs.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Line 4.2, same page: a decrease of \$148 million. Same thing?

Ms Sigurdson: It's actually an increase.

Mr. Stier: Oh, pardon me. Yes, an increase. Can you provide why you're spending more money there? Thank you so much.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. It is about the capital investment, you know, the \$5.2 billion over five years. That is just our significant investment in making sure that there are new builds, maintenance, that kind of thing.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Thank you.

Do you have a list of current assets with regard to all of that? You have in the business plan a performance measure. You list all the different government-owned and -subsidized properties somewhere, I imagine, and there are various conditions of disrepair and so on and so forth, percentages and so on. Do you have a list of that available that we could get at some point in time?

10:00

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That can be made available.

Mr. Stier: What would be the total cost to bring all of these up to, say, a good standard? Have you figured that out in the ministry at some point?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, we know that there's a billion dollars in deferred maintenance. That is the cost of getting every unit that we own up to standards. We're working on that, and certainly that's why we've made such a significant investment in the capital plan over these five years.

Mr. Stier: Okay. When we see things like 62 per cent in fair condition, 62 per cent in some ways less than that or in poor condition, what we're looking for there is just a little bit more detail. You know, we're going to spend \$1.2 billion, but it seems like when you get in those kinds of figures, instead of the maintenance situation you look at a total rehab or renewal.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Sometimes we are looking at that, and it makes more sense to actually create a new facility – for example, in the lodge system, sharing washrooms, going down the hallway to washrooms, and with the rooms being very small – and with a lot of some of the 40-year-old facilities that is the decision. We do assess that on a case-by-case basis, and of course with our standards now we want to have in-suite washrooms and the mobility things that people need. Absolutely, you're correct in that at times we need to just build a new facility, and that facility is levelled.

Mr. Stier: Sure. In the strategy and the planning for that do you include some of these figures? You've talked about the \$1 billion. Does that include temporary housing while construction is going on or moves and changes on a temporary basis until new facilities are open and available for use?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That would be accounted for in that budget, but I think that one thing we also try to do, you know, is that the existing lodge is supported until a new one is built. We may be actually building on a different site. Sometimes things can work out so that people aren't disrupted or have to move twice, and if we can do that, we try to. Sometimes that's not possible, but we do accommodate for the costs that would be incurred if people did have to relocate.

Mr. Stier: Okay. All right. Let's move on, then. We're getting through a lot of questions, and I appreciate the brevity and how we're going here. I see that I have roughly 13 minutes left, so hopefully we can get through this last little bit.

I'd like to talk a bit about the seniors' home adaptation and repair program. It's a new program, and I know that you have had to do some planning for that already. It's been a little bit controversial, to say the least. It's the new home equity program for seniors. According to the press releases that we've seen and some of the other information we've gotten, there's going to be an eligibility program here that is going to amount to roughly 145,000 households, my researchers tell me, and that equates to about 265,000 seniors. Can you explain how the loan portion of that program – I know there are two parts, a loan portion and a grant portion – was calculated out at about \$7 million, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, seniors who are eligible for those loans must have a household income of \$75,000 annually or less, and they have to have 25 per cent equity in their home, and of course they need to be on the title. We also, you know, have other programs that serve seniors, and based on previous years with the special-needs assistance program and the property tax deferral program, the investment of \$7 million came from figures related to those previous programs.

Mr. Stier: Okay. All right. Thank you.

There's a large number there, and obviously at this early stage there are some details that you've already probably put together to get to that number that are perhaps more granular than what you've just talked about. When this rolls out, is there something that's been allocated for just this year in that regard? Are you going to be consuming some of that already this year?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the \$7 million is for this year.

Mr. Stier: Just for this year alone?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Stier: Okay. All right. What about the following year, then? This year is probably the start-up year. Some of these things can expand and domino out, if I could say so, organically.

Ms Sigurdson: Right.

Mr. Stier: Do you have a longer range program strategy in mind yet? Has the business plan included some of that in some theoretical way, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, you know, it is our first year, as you say, and we will be assessing the uptake on that program after it is publicized and saturated. I mean, seniors' organizations already know about it, and more information will be coming. Based on who takes advantage of that, how many people, then I think we can do some good projections further. Certainly, this year we're going to be learning about that, and we're committed to continuing this program into the next fiscal year, so I would estimate it would increase because more people know about things. We're thinking probably about \$9 million for next year, but again we have to determine what the budget is and how things are going to go for the next fiscal cycle.

Mr. Stier: Very well. Okay. As I mentioned earlier, another question that comes up in our minds again is the regulations, and regulations are the things that we always wonder about but don't get a chance to talk about much in the Assembly. Do you know when those will be put together and all the other pieces to this organization and be ready for the program to roll right out? Is some of that already done now? What stage are we at? I guess that is what I'm asking, please.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, they'll be done. They're in process right now and ready to go by July 1, of course, which is the beginning of the program.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Thank you. I knew there was a pending deadline coming up, so I just wanted to inquire on that.

Is there a department in the ministry that's going to be looking after this specifically, then?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we certainly have familiarity with delivery of this kind of financial program. The seniors' benefit is a program that we do, so staff will continue to do that, the program planning and delivery staff. The funding is in 2.1 of the estimates. It is a financial program similar to other financial programs that we offer, so staff are very familiar with this type of program.

Mr. Stier: Yet, if I may, Minister, we talked about some of the decreases to program delivery earlier on. Obviously, this one will cause added work that you're not currently doing. Will that be something that will have an impact elsewhere – dragging money across, reallocating – to make sure it works? How do you envision that, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we see ourselves being, actually, in a pretty strong situation in terms of staffing. There was \$8 million cut from the special-needs assistance program by the previous government, and when they did that, they did not cut the staff complement that facilitated that program, so we have the capacity regarding our current staff.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Fair enough. In here somewhere it stated that the government will be borrowing for this. Do you have a cost in mind with regard to debt repayment cost for this situation that you're creating, and can you enlighten us about that kind of thing, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly. Treasury Board and Finance, you know, is responsible for how our government manages money, and they understand that we have this program rolling out. They have all the details about the finances, that go way beyond my understanding. I mean, I think that's really a question for Treasury Board and Finance. They have significant details about how they manage the money that the government has.

10:10

Mr. Stier: Really? That surprises me a little bit because the ministry has X amount of dollars calculated out, and part of the cost of programs is, I would assume, borrowing. Am I off tilt on that? Don't you have some sort of line number or budget line within your department with respect to that? This is quite a significant program of borrowing.

Ms Sigurdson: Our budget comes from the general revenue fund. That comes from Treasury Board and Finance.

Mr. Stier: So the different costs within your ministry, debt and interest costs, are never calculated into the figures that you're working with?

Ms Sigurdson: No.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Thank you for clearing that up for me. I appreciate that information.

Lastly, then, a lot of people with fixed incomes and that may be taking part in this, as you've said. Have you stated or is there an idea of interest rates on these types of loans? Can you expand on that a little bit for the committee, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. The loan rate is going to be prime.

Mr. Stier: Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: I just want to add a couple more things that, you know, we can do that a private financial institution wouldn't do necessarily in that it's simple interest – it's not compound, so that's of benefit to the seniors – and we don't expect a monthly payment back. It's actually only when the asset is sold, when their home is sold or the estate is sold. For low-income seniors having another payment might be hard, but we do want to keep them in their homes, so these components give good sense as to why the government would actually administer this program as opposed to a private bank.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Thank you.

Just a last question. I don't know if it's been thought of, but in the worst-case scenario do you have some sort of a contingency plan where you might wind up owning homes at some point? Is that built into some of your long-range considerations as the program gets along in time, please?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, it is a consideration, but we think it's unlikely. Certainly, that's one of the reasons why, you know, we have said that they have to have 25 per cent equity in their home. So people are in secure situations. Certainly, we feel that this program probably would happen only – another program that's kind of similar to this is the property tax deferral program.

Mr. Stier: Yes. I'd like to move on to that right now if I could, actually, and I see I've got four minutes, roughly, Madam Chairman. To the minister. On page 208, financial transactions, line 2.6, 12 and a half million dollars, a budget decrease. Can you explain the fluctuation between the '14-15 actual and the '15-16 budget? This year, now, are you expecting fewer seniors will access this program, or are you estimating property taxes will go down?

Ms Sigurdson: The decrease is primarily due to actual property tax deferral disbursements estimated for '16-17, so the property has gone down, revised estimates, you know, just because of the state of affairs.

Mr. Stier: Okay. You have, I guess, then, decided on some guesstimates as to how it might occur in that calculation.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. What I'm being advised here is that, you know, for the forecast from '15-16, we now know the actuals, and they're actually closer to our estimates. So those were high, the previous forecast.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Fair enough. With that, do you conduct market assessments to predict property taxes for seniors in the future, then? I mean, how do you foresee 2017 with the various increases in taxes that are being announced every day, including the carbon tax, as an example? How do you fit all that into your assessments of the market?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, we are always working with municipalities, Municipal Affairs to forecast that, to sort of get all that information. We are in those conversations to make sure that we have an idea of what they will be going forward.

Mr. Stier: Okay. Yet it seems to me, with respect, that we have an awful lot of things floating around like corks on the water in terms of municipal funding. Seniors' housing is one of them. Social housing is another. Grants in lieu of taxes program, all these kinds

of things: these things may come in to impact those living in those small communities that have some seniors in social housing situations. I gather that you must have made allowances for some of that in some of your strategic thinking. Is that fair?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. I mean, obviously, our government, certainly with the \$1.2 billion investment, is working very closely with municipalities, making sure that they have that affordable housing they need. This is, like, triple the total investment that has been done in some time. We're really significantly stepping up. Certainly, I know that our municipal partners are very pleased and feel supported by our move to invest in seniors' and affordable housing.

Mr. Stier: Okay. The last question in this section, then, if I could, is regarding the ATB. The decision was made not to implement this program through the ATB. Can you explain why that decision was made? What was behind that? As the time is getting very close to 20 seconds, perhaps you'll have to answer that in writing if you could. But we're also wondering: would they have charged an exorbitant amount? Is that why you thought that it would be better to go this way?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, it's not like a regular loan, you know . . .

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but the time allotted for this portion has expired.

I would now invite, for the next 20 minutes, members of the third-party opposition and the minister to speak. Would you like to have the timer set at 10 minutes to identify the halfway point?

Mr. Gotfried: No. That's fine.

The Chair: Are you wanting to share your time with the minister?

Mr. Gotfried: We will, indeed.

The Chair: Thank you. Go ahead.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister and your great staff, for joining us this morning. Again, our thoughts, of course, are with those individuals in Fort McMurray who I know you and your department will be charged with assisting as we go forward.

I'm going to start out with a question related to that, to get that off the plate, as it were, because I know it's at the top of all of our minds. I notice that in the budget on page 214 there's an emergency housing amount which, from previous actuals of roughly \$6 million, has now been only allocated about \$1.4 million for 2016. I'm assuming that we're probably into that, if not through that, already with emergency housing. I'm going to ask you now if you have any information with respect to whether we have exceeded that budget already and what contingencies are in place to ensure that that budget is beefed up for emergency housing requirements related to the Fort McMurray fires.

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, there is so much in flux right now with the devastating situation in Fort McMurray that in terms of hard numbers we don't really have those right now, so I can't tell you exactly how much is needed or will be needed. But in the event of disaster, emergency funding would be requested through the Treasury Board process. If we need additional funding, we can certainly do that. We can go to supplementary estimates if that is needed. Of course, it's very important for our government to make sure that the people of Fort McMurray are supported during this very tragic time.

Mr. Gotfried: Minister, I hope that with the experience of Slave Lake maybe we would have some sense of what the numbers might look like. I think that this committee and the Legislature would be very interested in, you know, how much we have perhaps already exceeded the current budget by and what kind of expectations we'll have of that.

My next question is very much related to it. It's around the resources in your department to deal with that emergency housing. I know that it's – again, this is not a choice we've made but an emergency situation that we have to address. I'm concerned that the resources that are going to be pulled into Fort McMurray are going to affect the delivery of some of the other programs that you've committed to. Do you foresee any resource issues, or do you foresee that you're going to have to increase resources in your department to not only deal with the emergency situation but with those ambitious plans that you already have in place?

10:20

Ms Sigurdson: Right. I mean, of course, we want to be very careful in our management of the situation. We want to make sure that we're going ahead with our investments and, you know, this full plan that we have. We do need, absolutely, to make sure that the people of Fort McMurray who have lost their homes due to this devastating fire are supported, too. So it is very much making sure that we manage this very well. It's early days.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. I guess I'm hoping that you've had at least an emergency triage at this point to understand whether you will need further resources, but I'll . . .

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, that is ongoing, and we'll certainly be having emergency cabinet meetings and having those kinds of discussions.

Mr. Gotfried: All right. No. I'm feeling for your team, that the resources will be stretched going forward.

Minister, just looking at the business plan, your focus is on Albertans most in need and on those with modest means. I just wanted to get a sense, without getting into too much detail, of the demographics, specifically the income ranges for individuals and families that you will continue to address going forward. We know that there's going to be increased stress on many Albertans who have lost their jobs. Modest means may be new to many people; as well, most in need might be new. So I'm just wondering, in terms of the income levels that you have looked at and will continue to look at, if you could just give me a sense of those or where I can look to find those specific thresholds that we'll be applying.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I could just share some income thresholds, I think. Is that the question?

Mr. Gotfried: Minister, sorry. Rather than get into detail, is it the core-need income thresholds that you'll continue to utilize?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. Those are available online. I know that as well. Thank you.

So that will be the guideline in terms of identifying Albertans most in need going forward as well?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you.

In terms of who we are working with, there was reference to other government parties and various references about who you'll work

with. I think you've mentioned that with respect to your answers to the other hon. member. But I just want to clarify that, going forward, you intend to continue to partner with the private, nonprofit, and, possibly, faith-based organizations in terms of leveraging the public investment that you're making.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes, certainly. Absolutely. You know, the housing management bodies, for example: those are close stakeholders, but they work with the private sector, municipalities to make sure that the needs of that particular community are supported. Of course, it's the private sector who is building and doing some of the architectural work and different things like that. But, certainly, yes, we'll work with the private sector. It's really collective, working together.

Mr. Gotfried: Great.

I know that that's more and more common in the seniors' market, but how about in the affordable housing market? Are you going to continue to work with both private builders and the nonprofit sector in the affordable housing realm as well?

Ms Sigurdson: I would say that the same answer is valid.

Mr. Gotfried: Right. That's good news. Thank you.

Minister, there's been lots of talk over the years and ongoing about an affordable housing strategy. In some cases I like to think of it as a housing affordability strategy for seniors, including rental and ownership options and workforce housing as well. I know that you have the ability and opportunity to move forward with that, and I just wondered if – we now also have a private member's bill on the table which relates to similar initiatives. I just wanted to get your sense of where your ministry is at in terms of perhaps setting up some other bodies, organizations, committees or working with current organizations or whether you're going to defer to that private member's initiative to achieve that.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, you know, our significant investment in the five-year capital plan, I think, shows this government's commitment to affordable housing and seniors' housing. Currently I certainly have been hearing from many of our stakeholders the request for an overall plan. I am talking with my government colleagues about that, and we are just in consultation regarding that. More information will come, but for now I think that our government has spoken quite loudly that we care very much about affordable and seniors' housing here in the province and are committed to ensuring that we have that kind of support for our citizens.

Mr. Gotfried: That's great, Minister. I mean, I think there's a call from many fronts for a more robust strategy, so hopefully we'll move towards that as time goes forward.

Minister, there are a lot of references in your business plan to innovation. We all know that that's going to be more significantly required as we move forward. In fact, it says that you're committed to "innovative ways to ensure Albertans are supported." I'm assuming again that that's not only in affordable housing but in seniors' housing and various other ways. I'm wondering, you know, what you've taken a look at, what your ministry has looked at in terms of perhaps doing something more innovative in terms of housing forms, both for seniors and affordable housing, and the tenure types that might be addressed there and if you'd give me a few examples of those.

Ms Sigurdson: Could you just help me find in the business plan what you're pointing to?

Mr. Gotfried: Yeah. Actually, I think it's on the first page of the business plan, right at the bottom of page 113. "Seniors and Housing is committed to finding innovative ways to ensure Albertans are supported and can participate in their communities to the best of their ability." The term "innovative ways" is the key there.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I guess I'll go back to our bill that we passed this session, the seniors' home adaptation and repair program, otherwise known as SHARP, which supports seniors actually staying in their homes. We know that seniors want to be in their homes. Like, 90 per cent of seniors live in their own homes or live in homes, not in facilities like seniors' lodges. People, you know, honestly do not want to go to a larger facility, so we want to do what we can to make sure that seniors are aging in community and that supports are in place for that.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Minister.

Ms Sigurdson: I guess just another piece of that, too, would be sort of elder abuse grants, which is unfortunately a sad social ill, and making sure that seniors are supported through that programming.

Mr. Gotfried: Minister, with all due respect, I don't look at that as being highly innovative. I think that those are just some measures to keep people in their existing housing types.

In looking at both seniors' and affordable housing, there were some things that I noted, that I think there are some opportunities for. There was very little reference to different types of tenure. I know that we're looking at an increased senior population, doubling over the next 15 years, but we also have one of the youngest populations, at a median age of 36.1, in Alberta, so our problems are actually at two ends of the spectrum, individuals and young families and seniors as well. I don't see any specific reference to things such as attainable home ownership in here or, possibly, new innovative programs that we see across the world: rent-to-own, shared equity, assisted down payment programs. I don't see any specific references there.

Many of the organizations that you've mentioned here, Habitat for Humanity and others like Attainable Homes Calgary, Capital Region Housing's home program, PEAK home ownership, Classic Construction, and in-house organizations across this province who have been driven towards innovation, are not referenced, nor are there any options in here. I guess my question to you is: are you looking at some innovation, which you've noted in your business plan, in terms of housing forms for both seniors' and affordable housing and different tenure types, which will allow both seniors and individuals and families to actually improve their lot with respect to affordable and appropriate housing?

Ms Sigurdson: Just to make sure that I understand you, can you just explain what you mean by tenure types?

Mr. Gotfried: Tenure types: really, from, I guess, housing the homeless right up through subsidized rental through to market housing, that could be affordable, but also, in terms of ownership, through to attainable home ownership, again, rent-to-own. There are some great innovations in the U.K. under a program there called home buy, which gives you some opportunities to look at different ways to move people into housing independence. Again, shared equity programs, rent-to-own and assisted down payment programs

are quite common in various other parts of the world, less common here in Alberta.

Ms Sigurdson: Right.

Mr. Gotfried: In terms of the housing forms, new and innovative housing forms, we're hearing that seniors want some different opportunities, not necessarily to live in larger institutions but to live in more shared accommodations, co-ops, and different things like that.

Ms Sigurdson: Sure. Well, certainly, as you say, we do provide the spectrum of housing supports. You know, again I'll just say that what we're focused on right now is that \$1 billion in deferred maintenance that we inherited from your government. We have a lot of work to do with the existing stock. That doesn't mean that we don't want to do programs or support programs where there is a ladder to home ownership like Habitat for Humanity or Capital Region Housing are doing. Certainly, that's important to us. Certainly, I've met with many groups who talk about mixed accommodations so that there are many different income levels in the same facility. You know, this is sort of part of our consultations with many community partners about what we need to do in Alberta, but really our focus very much right now, just in the beginning of our second year in government, is really to make sure that the facilities that we have are up to code and new facilities are built. Certainly, some of the suggestions that you've made – I mean, we are looking into all of those things.

10:30

Mr. Gotfried: You would be open to some pilot projects with some partners if those became available at a reasonable cost?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, we're very open to meeting with people to hear their ideas and would be happy to do that.

Mr. Gotfried: That's great.

Minister, getting to the point you made about some of the deferred maintenance that's required, which I think is a very serious issue for all of us, I was looking at some of the statistics on the performance measures here, and I think it was referenced by the previous questioner about us having currently 62 per cent of the housing stock in fair condition and 33 per cent in good condition. I know that there's some talk about a billion dollars' worth of deferred maintenance, and I'm seeing, really, over a three-year period a change in only 3 per cent of that housing stock, moving it from poor to good condition. I'm wondering. I mean, that's a 3 per cent change; you're talking about a billion dollars. I guess I'm interested in some specifics in terms of timelines and budgets to achieve that 3 per cent shift and whether these numbers actually include some new housing stock, which, in my mind, might achieve that 3 per cent just through the addition of new housing stock, without any reference to improvement of some of those in poor condition.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I'm going to defer to my deputy minister, Shannon Marchand.

Mr. Gotfried: Great. Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Marchand: It does reflect the housing facility condition index, right? It's what's being measured here. We do think that, obviously, we'll be focusing on the parts of the portfolio that are in the poorest condition, so that's where we see the shift from the poor to the good. This measure doesn't sort of speak to anything outside of the portfolio – right? – because it only includes what you have. I think that as we look at renewal within the system and other investments

that are made, you know, we will want to continue to make sure that performance measure is a relevant measure or if it needs to be expanded or addressed in some way.

Mr. Gotfried: Great. Thank you.

Minister, I guess just following in this line of questioning a little bit: are there some of the assets in that I think roughly \$7 billion worth of assets which should not be reinvested in, that we should decommission and create new product and maybe repurpose the land that those facilities are on, where we can increase the density probably to higher density zoning, which may exist on those sites, probably highly valuable land if it's older housing stock, where we can actually do something better for the taxpayer and for the seniors or affordable housing options that are there?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Certainly, for some facilities it makes sense to replace them, as you suggest, creating that greater density, the mixed model with different income levels in a facility. Certainly, those are some things that we're looking at.

Mr. Gotfried: Do we have a list of those that are likely candidates for that decommissioning? Do we have plans to reposition or to accommodate those individuals that are currently in those into either newer facilities, which would be, I'm sure, a thrill for them, or into other existing facilities?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. We do have an assessment of what our current stock is and different plans with various communities to determine which facilities need to be completely replaced and which need to be renovated, and if there is any disruption to those folks who are living in them, then accommodation for them. So, yes, that's part of it.

Mr. Gotfried: Minister, are those assessments, budgets, and timelines available to us?

Ms Sigurdson: I understand that the assessments are public information. In terms of the exact projects, housing plan, that's ongoing, so there isn't – that's being worked on right now.

Mr. Gotfried: I think, certainly, I myself and members of the committee would like to see some of those budgets and timelines going forward. In my experience in the private sector if you don't have budgets and timelines, nothing much gets done, so we'd like to see those if that could be tabled in the future. Thank you, Minister.

Just wanted to get into a few questions with respect to some of the housing funding issues here. On page 214 there's reference to rental assistance programs, which I see is flat at roughly \$65 million. I guess I've got some deep concerns going forward that we're in a very tough economy, and I find it kind of hard to believe that a flat budget towards rental assistance of \$65 million, if that's what the current expectations are, is going to be adequate, whether you actually believe that in a tough economy like this a static budget amount is going to be adequate to address what we can, I think, quite rightly expect to be greater need from within the affordable housing realm.

Ms Sigurdson: I did want to identify that actually it has gone up. It does reflect a 2 per cent increase from 2015-16, from \$65.3 million to \$66.6 million. That means that 260 families will be off our wait-list, and it's about a \$1.3 million investment, so there has been an increase.

Mr. Gotfried: With all due respect, I think our wait-lists are going to get a bit longer on there, Minister. I hope that that's not the case,

but I think with our economy that 2 per cent is going to be rather modest.

On page 208, 3.2, Alberta seniors' benefit grants. Again, a similar situation with seniors' supplemental income affected by our economy, I believe. I think many seniors are now working past retirement age, but many of those may have lost their jobs. That is also static at \$270 million. Again, I'm concerned. We've seen that there's – some of your reference to volunteerism is there for seniors, but I think many of them are losing their jobs. Can you address the fact that some seniors are going to lose their income? You may have to answer this to me later, but the fact is that \$270 million is a static, flat amount there, and I just can't see that being adequate in a downturn in the economy.

Ms Sigurdson: I just want to say that our forecast for 2015-16 . . .

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but the time allotted for this portion has expired.

I would now like to invite for the next 20 minutes the member from the Alberta Liberal Party, Dr. Swann, and the minister to speak. Would you like the timer set at 10 minutes to identify the halfway point?

Dr. Swann: Not necessary. Thanks.

The Chair: Would you like to share your time with the minister?

Dr. Swann: Yes. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. Go ahead.

Dr. Swann: Well, thank you very much, Minister and staff, for being here. An important area of review for all of us in Alberta. I want to start by commending your department for a significantly increased budget in social housing, getting on with the fire sprinkler needs across the province, your commitment to seniors' adaptation and repair, which will help maintain people in their homes or in conditions where they can have a higher quality of life. I'm particularly interested in highlighting your relationship with Habitat for Humanity. I mean, there is an organization that maximizes volunteer and human capital in a very positive way, both for the owners and for the communities, so that's tremendous. I hope that will be nurtured and increased, evolved.

Some of the areas that I'm not clear on and would like to get some clarification on are around ASLI. I see it's not listed here, and I guess that's because it's been transferred to Health.

Ms Sigurdson: That's correct.

Dr. Swann: Okay. Your rural housing and First Nation housing approach: can you describe what that means and how you define rural needs and, separately from the rural housing needs but not necessarily separately, how First Nations fits into your housing program now?

Ms Sigurdson: In our five-year capital plan we have \$120 million allocated for indigenous housing off-reserve. You know, we know that Edmonton is going to supersede Winnipeg as having the largest population of indigenous people in Canada in the next not too long, and it's very important for us to work with the indigenous community, make sure that we know what they need in terms of housing, so we are investing that \$120 million in that. I don't know if you noticed, but this year there isn't a line item for that, but of course it's in there because it's a key priority. We have \$16 million in planning, and some of those dollars can work with the indigenous community in addition to the \$120 million to help with working

with them to know – we don't want to just go tell them what to do, of course. We want to work with them in the communities to provide that housing. So that is under way. There's a plan being developed with the indigenous communities.

10:40

With the rural, of course, this is a key part of the housing portfolio because there are so many seniors' accommodations, you know, the lodges program across Alberta. I grew up in Valleyview in northern Alberta, and there's the Red Willow Lodge. It's a significant sort of landmark in a small community. We're certainly working with municipalities and all those housing management bodies to see what the needs are in their communities, and we do have sort of an assessment of what needs to be done and are working closely with them.

Dr. Swann: When you're talking about First Nations housing, are you talking about houses? Are you talking about ownership? Are you talking about, in any cases, trailers? What are the options for First Nations people?

Ms Sigurdson: It's off-reserve housing, so it's in urban centres, nothing to do with the reserve system. I have had some projects already come forward. Sometimes it's in partnership with academic institutions, so specific housing for indigenous students, and that would be, you know, some of the things . . .

Dr. Swann: Residences.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Some of that has been with specific supports for indigenous students, some differences in design to support them because oftentimes they come with their family. It's not just a young individual coming to university kind of thing. Maybe older students come with their mom and two kids. You know what I mean? So the housing is different than, say, a kid who's just going to university by themselves and just needs a dorm room. Certainly, there have been projects presented to me regarding that. As I said, we are working with the indigenous communities to develop those, but they're going to be in urban centres. If they're in big cities, it makes sense to have sort of more dense accommodation, not individual houses so much.

Dr. Swann: I suppose the same criteria would apply in terms of financial need for who qualifies for some of this housing. Is it the same criteria across the board, or are they different?

Ms Sigurdson: I mean, I think that those are sort of guidelines that we use already, but I think there may be some extraordinary circumstances. I mean, there may be some revisions to that specifically for the indigenous people, but I would say generally yes.

Dr. Swann: Okay. Are trailers part of your consideration? People living in trailer parks: is that a legitimate consideration for people who are needing housing?

Ms Sigurdson: To be quite honest, that hasn't been brought to my attention. There haven't been projects that have come forward regarding that.

Dr. Swann: I haven't heard of it either. I just was curious. It seems like legitimate housing for some people. Some people may not be able to afford independent housing or apartments, condos, but for some it may be a useful alternative, something to consider.

In line 2.6 you anticipated \$12.9 million for the seniors' repair and adaptation program for the first year. On what do you base that \$12.9 million estimate?

Ms Sigurdson: That's the grant and the loan together. Well, \$2 million is for the grant program, so seniors who do not have 25 per cent equity on their home or incomes below \$26,400, I think, for a single and \$43,000 for a couple. They still want to be able to stay in their homes, so there is that grant component. The other part is the loan.

Dr. Swann: The other \$11 million would be for the loan.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. There's \$7 million for the loan program, \$2 million for the grant program, and – I'm not sure. Can you tell us where you're looking? Is it here?

Dr. Swann: It's line 2.6.

Ms Sigurdson: That also includes the property tax deferral program, so that's why that number is larger, but certainly it is \$7 million for the loan and \$2 million for the grant.

Dr. Swann: How do you anticipate \$7 million for a program that's just brand new?

Ms Sigurdson: Right. It is. It is a projection, but it is based on, you know, previous financial programs like the tax deferral program and the seniors' benefit program. That gives us an idea of what the costs will be.

Dr. Swann: Indeed, the property tax deferral program is only taken up by 1 per cent of seniors. What do you think is behind the low uptake of the tax deferral program, or is there any reason why you might review it?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the property tax deferral program is voluntary, of course, so it is available for seniors who are interested in deferring their payments.

Dr. Swann: Have you had any feedback from seniors that it's not an attractive program?

Ms Sigurdson: I'm not sure about that. The seniors, you know, own their own homes, and many of them do own them outright and may not need that. I mean, that's something. I think it is a little bit of an era piece. People feel that they need to pay their bills whereas with something like the seniors' home adaptation program, I mean, there may be a major renovation that they need, that they just can't afford. Usually most seniors can manage their taxes, but if they can't, this program is available for them because we certainly want them to be able to stay in their homes.

Approximately 4,800 loans were issued in 2013 for under \$15 million. That's the uptake.

Dr. Swann: Okay. With respect to seniors' needs the Seniors' Advocate had something like 550 concerns, I think you mentioned.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. That's right.

Dr. Swann: What was the level of satisfaction, do you think, with the Seniors' Advocate's handling of those concerns? Do you have any sense of whether the seniors were adequately served with those 550 concerns, or were they simply dealt with and we don't know what level of satisfaction there was with the Seniors' Advocate?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, any time a senior phones and talks to the advocate's office, their concern is addressed to completion – right? – so that the issue is resolved in some way. That's just sort of the standard practice, that all the issues are resolved with each senior that comes in. Maybe they don't get exactly what they want, but

their concern is addressed, and certainly if there is something that needs to be mitigated, it's taken care of, you know. I mean, we have to follow the guidelines of our programs and things like that, so sometimes it may be an education piece for the senior, but certainly all the issues are resolved.

I'm just being advised here that a lot of the concerns of the seniors are about just system navigation. You know, it's complex. We have a big government. What are the appropriate services and information that they can have?

Sometimes it is about care and treatment in facilities and those concerns. I mean, you know, certainly, as Minister of Seniors and Housing I get letters all the time from seniors who are concerned that something has not been cleaned properly in their location. So we follow up – this is before it even gets to the advocate – and we address those kinds of concerns.

Other issues include inadequate communication, accommodation issues, including access to appropriate housing, you know, if someone can't find the housing that they need. Accessibility issues, including access to home care and supports, abuse, financial issues are all part of some of the things that we are dealing with.

Dr. Swann: Okay. I guess, to dig a little deeper, my question really relates also to the level of satisfaction with the Seniors' Advocate office. Do you have a sense of what the level of satisfaction is with the Seniors' Advocate?

Ms Sigurdson: We really don't have a strong sense of that, but we are recruiting currently to that position.

Dr. Swann: A new Seniors' Advocate, you mean?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That position is vacant currently. So the staff that are with the Health Advocate are people who are trained specifically to support seniors. We are recruiting currently, and we'll take that on advisement, like: how can we make sure that seniors are getting the services they need, and are they satisfied with the advocate's work?

10:50

Dr. Swann: That's great because without an independent advocate, it's pretty hard for anybody to know whether they're doing their job or not if we don't have any feedback from the very people that are supposed to benefit from the advocate.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you. We're looking into that.

Dr. Swann: Have you thought about doing a general seniors' survey on quality of life, to assess the level of quality of life for seniors in the province to get a sense of where the needs are?

Ms Sigurdson: What we are doing is sort of those performance indicators of a sense of well-being. Another measure is volunteerism, so people who feel they're connected to their community and are active in it. Those are some of the indicators that we have in our business plan. Just even the income levels of seniors, which, you know, can be correlated with quality of life. Those are the measures that we are using currently.

Dr. Swann: And this would relate to some of the housing that is currently provided, transportation for seniors, access to care from where they are, food, I suppose, in some of these institutions. Do you have any measures for those quality-of-life issues across the board, or is that something that you would consider?

Ms Sigurdson: In our business plan it is a general view. The seniors themselves are reporting their satisfaction level.

Dr. Swann: Satisfaction with services or satisfaction with life?

Ms Sigurdson: Life. Yes.

Dr. Swann: What about the services? No?

Ms Sigurdson: No. But, I mean, one thing that you did identify, that I just wanted to mention, was that a lot of seniors may not drive anymore or have access to transit, and that can be a really key indicator of quality of life, that you can go shopping or get your hair done or see the doctor, all those kinds of things. That's something that we have invested in as a government in terms of working with the University of Alberta researchers with the transportation tool kit to help sort of more rural areas. Larger centres have that infrastructure to make that kind of planning; for example, like the Wainwright handibus, you know, a pilot project that just has made really a life-changing, positive situation for people.

Dr. Swann: Definitely.

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, you know, from our meetings with stakeholders, which we have continually, we know that these are some of the concerns that they bring to us. So we are acting from some of our consultation processes.

Dr. Swann: Great.

What about ethnic seniors, new Canadians? What do we know about new Canadian seniors and their quality of life, their access to services, their satisfaction with services? Is that something you'd consider looking into?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. I'm more specifically focused – I mean, certainly, like all of Alberta, you know, whatever demographic, we're a more and more diverse province. I know that my own parents live in Mill Woods, and there's a big Sikh population, and the seniors' centre that they go to there is completely integrated with people like me, with white skin, and others in different groups. I know that that Mill Woods centre is certainly serving the needs of a diverse community. I think that your point is well taken.

Of course, we are welcoming Syrian refugees, many refugees from other countries, so that should be top of mind for us to make sure that people are connecting with their communities because we know that it can cause social ills if people are isolated or not connected.

Dr. Swann: Overcrowded. I hear stories of a lot of overcrowding among some of the new Canadian families, including their seniors, and that's a hotbed for abuse, of course, if seniors are vulnerable and in a place where they are absolutely dependent on the people around them.

With respect to First Nations it sounds like you are doing a planning and consultation process with First Nations seniors as well as other First Nations off-reserve about their housing needs and their quality-of-life issues.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. All off-reserve, you know, across the spectrum in terms of age.

Dr. Swann: That's great.

I have raised before an idea that I first learned about through Vancouver, that municipalities and provinces are transferring property and buildings to nongovernment organizations because those nongovernment organizations can leverage loans and they can do things that the government can't do with either renewing housing or building new housing on a property that's been lying dormant for years and years. It's a win-win for the nongovernment

organizations because they get a new boost in terms of their ability to provide services. They can leverage loans on the basis of the capital that's already there, and the government can divest itself to some extent of responsibilities that they're not able to maintain for budgetary reasons. Have you looked at that at all? I call it the Vancouver model just because that's where I learned about it. Are you looking at that as something to negotiate with municipalities or indeed for some of your own provincial land that's just lying dormant and could be maximized not by government but by nongovernment organizations or private operators who could develop accommodations on it?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, we're aware of the issue that you're raising. It is part of our considerations regarding the capital plan and the regulations. I think, you know, we're really, at this point, very open to sort of looking at different ways of making sure that we have the greatest capacity to provide housing. I mean, we do have a wait-list of 15,000 families and stock that's not up to code. We have a lot of demand on our system right now, so we absolutely want to be looking at how we can make sure that enough homes and different kinds of accommodation that people need across the spectrum are provided.

Dr. Swann: I know that some groups like the Resolve campaign in Calgary and the Trinity Place Foundation in Calgary have said that they would welcome that opportunity, so I would encourage you to look at that possibility to move things forward more quickly.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. I did. I've met with Resolve, and they have some really great ideas. Certainly, I was pleased to hear what they had to share.

Dr. Swann: Good.

Those are my questions. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would now like to invite members from government caucus, for the next 20 minutes, to speak with the minister. Would you like the timer set for 10 minutes to identify the halfway point?

Mr. Shepherd: No. That's not necessary. Thank you.

The Chair: Would you like to go back and forth with the minister?

Mr. Shepherd: Yes. We'll go back and forth with the minister if we may.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Shepherd: Actually, Madam Chair, if we may, we'd like to cede the first five minutes of our time just to allow the legislative staff to be able to take a bit of a break, to allow the minister to have a bit of a break, and then reconvene to begin our questioning.

The Chair: Okay. We'll set the timer for five minutes, and we'll resume the meeting when the timer has gone off.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 10:57 a.m. to 11:02 a.m.]

The Chair: I would now like to invite government caucus members to speak for the next 15 minutes.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister and to your staff, for being here today. I've been looking forward to this

opportunity. Certainly, the issue of housing is one that's been of great concern for many that I've spoken with here in my own constituency of Edmonton-Centre, an issue that I've been working on closely with my colleague Lorne Dach from Edmonton-McClung. I know we've had a few opportunities to meet with you personally and with some of your ministerial staff. I've appreciated that and appreciate the opportunity to sit down and discuss things a bit more with you here today.

I just wanted to start out by looking a little bit at the capital plan with your ministry. Now, on pages 48 and 49 of the capital plan you're outlining a significant amount of capital funding for three categories of new housing supply. I was wondering if you could just elaborate a little bit, give us a bit more information about what are some of the major projects that might be included in that funding.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Thank you. Certainly, our capital plan – I've referred to some of them already, and I will go through them again. We have \$120 million of the five-year capital plan that will focus on indigenous off-reserve housing, so that's a significant investment our government is making. You know, indigenous people are moving more and more to urban centres, so we are absolutely wanting to support them with their housing needs.

New housing supply, affordable housing includes \$147.7 million to support new projects that will add new social and affordable housing in communities of highest need.

New housing supply for homeless and specialized populations: this includes \$13 million to support projects aimed at addressing homelessness and sometimes people who are hard to house, people with addiction issues – support is sometimes targeted at single-parent families – that kind of thing.

Sustainable housing renewal includes \$581.9 million to support major replacements and renewal of existing social housing supports.

So that's kind of addressing some of the billion dollars in deferred maintenance that we have. Just very quickly, those are a few of the significant investments that we are making.

Mr. Shepherd: Excellent. Thank you, Minister.

Also, in terms of that funding, then, I know you've had the opportunity to meet with many of the public housing authorities, including Capital Region Housing Corporation and some of the others. You've had the opportunity to speak with the Alberta Network of Public Housing Agencies. One of the concerns that they have brought up is that many of them firmly believe that public dollars in terms of housing should be spent and kept contained within public housing projects. I know with the previous government we saw that they did favour P3s, some other forms of privatizing some government services, including social housing. I was wondering if you could outline for us if any of the amounts that we see in this funding, then, here in the capital plan, that we've just been speaking of, are in fact being directed towards private landlords or developers?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Certainly, I want to start by going in a bit different direction from the previous government where social housing delivery is concerned. The priority for capital funding will direct investment in capital-owned and -supported housing units rather than capital grants to others. We are moving away from private or community ownership and back towards the province financing and owning housing assets. Our community partners such as housing management bodies and nonprofit groups will continue to operate the properties and provide support for residents. I believe government is in the best position to deliver social housing units

and programs for Albertans in need. We are still considering partnering opportunities with housing management bodies, municipalities, nonprofits, and the federal government if funding is available and projects are fiscally responsible.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Minister.

Just one last question, then, on the capital plan. I do note that on page 49 of the capital plan there is \$14 million that's allotted over the next five years for planning. Now, of course, as we've been discussing here, we have a significant shortage in housing at the moment, quite a bit of maintenance that needs to be done. So why is it that we're putting forward a significant sum like this, specifically just for planning, when there's a lot that needs to be built and many that are ready to be built, I think, as we are now?

Ms Sigurdson: We understand the importance of planning to ensure delivery on time and on budget. The capital investment of nearly \$1.2 billion is a significant investment, and we want to do it right. Some of the funding will be used for comprehensive needs assessment. Evidence-based decision-making will ensure that we build the right type of housing in the right place. Funding will also be used to plan the renewal projects listed in the capital plan so they are delivered on time and on budget. These major renewal projects will bring more units back on stream for Albertans who need homes.

We also need to develop a program delivery model specifically for off-reserve housing for indigenous Albertans and the construction of new affordable housing stock. We'll be working with indigenous communities to see how best to do this work.

Certainly, those planning dollars are very important to us to make sure that we're thoughtful in the way we go forward.

Mr. Shepherd: Okay. I guess that makes sense. With the significant amounts we've got invested towards building, we want to make sure, then, that we're building what's needed and that we're building it well.

Let's move on, then, to the budget itself, looking at page 208 of the estimates there, line item 4.2. Now, of course, we've been talking about the significant, I guess, deficit that we sort of inherited here. This has been something I think from previous governments, both federal and provincial. We saw a certain amount of neglect that sort of brought us to this situation. I do see now, though, that you are putting an additional \$148 million in assistance forward for the Alberta Social Housing Corporation. Can you give us a sense, then, Minister, what the improvements are that are going to be made to the housing structures through this investment?

Ms Sigurdson: Of course, it's very important for us to be supporting vulnerable Albertans during an economic downturn, and that support is needed more than ever because of that. The line you refer to is related to operating budgets. This is the support our housing management bodies require to operate social housing facilities and seniors' lodges. We've added \$9.7 million to community housing in 2016-17 and \$20.3 million to seniors' housing. These are areas that need more investment so that they continue to support Albertans.

We're also providing a 2 per cent increase to housing management bodies' budgets for social housing and seniors' lodges. This will keep Albertans in their homes. Increases are needed because housing management body funding has been frozen for the previous three years while the cost of operating the units continues to rise. These funding increases also reflect the widening

gap between revenues and operating expenses. Certainly, there's some key support there that's been missing for some time.

11:10

Mr. Shepherd: Okay. Well, continuing on that line, then, looking again at this \$1 billion in deferred maintenance we've been discussing here, I recognize, of course, that that is a priority. That's something that needs to be addressed. We need to mobilize as much of this housing that we have as possible, but at the same time we're recognizing that there is a significant need for new housing for vulnerable Albertans, as some of the others have noted who have been speaking today. Minister, do you feel that there's enough set aside in this budget, in these estimates that we have here today, to both address the backlog of maintenance and allow for us to actually build some of the new structures that are needed?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, I'm very pleased that our government is stepping up and committed to the \$1.2 billion in the capital plan for affordable and social housing. This is a huge increase from what's been allocated in the past many years. We have \$238 million over five years for preservation and maintenance, and this work is vital because we already have many units in the province that should be available to Albertans but aren't because they need upgrades and renovations. We're making the investment for a couple of reasons: one, we may need to maintain and preserve our valuable housing assets so they are available for Albertans for many more years; second, and most importantly, we need more available units for Albertans to call home. Maintenance and preservation will bring more units on stream, and that's more Albertans in a home and off waiting lists or in inadequate facilities.

Yes, we have a big deficit to clear out. We've been working hard to address this backlog, and this investment will make a significant impact on that work. Repairing existing units allows them to be reoccupied relatively soon compared with the time needed to build new units, so I think this is really a significant investment to address some of that extraordinary backlog.

Mr. Shepherd: Do we have a sense of how many units this will help us bring back on track?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I know that over this fiscal year it is 260 units. Is that right? Oh, that's the rental assistance. I don't know if we have that.

Mr. Shepherd: No problem. If you want to look for that while we talk about some other questions, that's fine.

Ms Sigurdson: We can look that up.

Mr. Shepherd: I know there have been some significant promises from the federal government in terms of additional funding. Is anything in that direction reflected in the estimates that we have here today?

Ms Sigurdson: No, no. This is just our provincial budget. Certainly, I've had the opportunity to meet with Minister Duclos. In their recent budget the federal government did announce some money that would be coming to support Alberta. I think we're still working out final numbers, but it is, you know, approximately – we don't know that. We're still working out final numbers, but there has been a commitment by the federal government to invest in affordable housing. We're meeting with the federal counterparts at the end of June, and I think more details will be coming soon. But our estimates don't include any of the federal.

Mr. Shepherd: Right. So there may be additional investment once we see federal dollars come in?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. We're certainly working very hard with our federal counterparts to let them know about our needs here in Alberta, and we'll certainly be letting you know when we know what those dollars will be.

Mr. Shepherd: Excellent. That's great to hear. Thank you.

At this point I'll hand things over to Mr. Westhead. I think he has a few questions on the business plan.

Mr. Westhead: Yes. Thank you very much. Actually, I wanted to start off with some questions about community grants. I know that in these difficult times more people are vulnerable and even more may be at risk. Obviously, this is especially true for seniors on fixed incomes who may be facing additional financial burdens. I understand that your ministry provides community grants that support various agencies in the work that they do supporting vulnerable Albertans. I'm just wondering if you can tell us a little bit more about the community grants, how they operate, and what kind of funding is allocated towards that.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Thank you. Certainly, you know, in this current difficult economic time it's really important that we do support vulnerable Albertans, and we need to be also prudent with the dollars that we have. As you say, there are no increases to community grants, but more importantly we have not decreased the funding. We're protecting community programs by maintaining our support. Just to give you a little bit more information about what community grants we do support, we fund seniors' abuse shelters, housing registries for seniors, research related to seniors and aging, and we fund the co-ordinated community response grants to address and prevent elder abuse.

More specifically, the Seniors Association of Greater Edmonton, otherwise known as SAGE, receives \$545,000 to support emergency and transitional accommodations for older adults escaping abuse and to fund their seniors' housing registry, that helps seniors find affordable and appropriate housing. We're also providing more than \$600,000 to the Kerby Centre in Calgary for their emergency shelter housing registry services and in-person information services for seniors. Certainly, we're committed to working with all Albertans to protect the safety and personal security of seniors in our communities.

Mr. Westhead: Thank you very much.

I know we talked a little bit earlier about elder abuse prevention, but I think it's a topic that deserves a little bit more attention, so I'm just wondering if we can go back to that a little bit: "Seniors are safe and able to remain independent in their chosen communities." On page 115 of the ministry business plan it lists elder abuse awareness as one of the key strategies, namely strategy 1.1. Minister, what is your ministry doing to advance elder abuse awareness and prevention in Alberta, and how does the budget support those efforts? I know, like I said, we did talk about this earlier, but if you could maybe elaborate on that topic.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you. Certainly, we are committed to working with all Albertans to protect the safety and personal security of seniors in our communities. Alberta Seniors and Housing works together with other governments, community partners, and Albertans to prevent and address elder abuse.

Since 2012 the ministry has provided 21 presentations to seniors and service providers to raise awareness about elder abuse and provide information about elder abuse resources. Between 2012 and

2016 more than 800 service providers have received awareness and prevention training, and more than 200 providers have also taken the train-the-trainer sessions to allow them to go back to their communities and provide training. In 2014-15 the ministry provided community response grants to 19 communities to support them in efforts to develop awareness and response plans; \$3 million has been allocated for the community response grants over three years, and I hope to announce this year's grant recipients in the coming weeks.

Mr. Westhead: I would like to talk a bit about the fire and safety upgrades.

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but the time allotted for this portion of the meeting has expired.

I would now like to invite members of the Official Opposition and the minister to speak for the next 10 minutes. Are you wanting to go back and forth?

Mr. Stier: Madam Chair, I'm going to relinquish this portion of my time to my colleague the Member for Airdrie, please.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Are you wanting to go back and forth with the minister?

Mrs. Pitt: Yes, please.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mrs. Pitt: Sorry; I relinquish my time to the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, and then you can come back to me.

The Chair: Okay. Hon. member, would you like to go back and forth with the minister?

Mr. Yao: Yes, please.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Yao: Earlier we discussed the independent Seniors' Advocate. You stated that money was a factor as to why you won't create an independent Seniors' Advocate in the House, yet your total budget is \$151 million higher than last year. Can you honestly tell me that elder abuse is a priority in your government?

Ms Sigurdson: Absolutely. Elder abuse is a significant priority. Seniors who are experiencing any kind of elder abuse or concerns are being served by organizations all across this province. We have made a significant capital investment, and of course that's the reason for our increase, because affordable housing and seniors' housing are needed across the province.

Mr. Yao: Can you confirm, Minister, what you said earlier, that the position of the Seniors' Advocate is vacant?

Ms Sigurdson: The position is currently vacant. A recruitment process is under way for it. All concerns that seniors have are being managed through the Health Advocate's office. You know, anybody who's calling in will be supported by staff who understand government services regarding seniors.

Mr. Yao: How long has this position been vacant?

11:20

Ms Sigurdson: The Health Advocate has been acting as the Seniors' Advocate since January 2015.

Mr. Yao: So for the whole time that I was asking you about making an independent Seniors' Advocate, you're saying that that position wasn't even filled as it stood.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the responsibilities are being fulfilled through the seniors' and health advocate, so absolutely the responsibilities of that role are being taken care of.

Mr. Yao: I'd like to cede my time to the Member for Airdrie.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mrs. Pitt: All right. Well, thank you, Minister. You said where in your budget your support for elder abuse is, line item 2.4. You also just said that there is only \$1 million allotted for elder abuse programming. Given that your budget is \$726 million, you spend .001 per cent on elder abuse. Why are you spending \$1 million on elder abuse, yet it's in your ministry's key priority 1.1?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, it is an absolute focus of our government, and it has been for the last three years. We work with community organizations, municipalities, and police agencies to ensure that seniors' concerns are addressed and that funding supports . . .

Mrs. Pitt: Sorry. What does that look like? I'm just trying to figure out how the funding can be reduced yet still maintained by such a significant margin.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. The police and Justice also respond to elder abuse – there is additional funding, not in this ministry – and we are working in partnership with them, and we have \$3 million over three years committed to this.

Mrs. Pitt: Did their funding increase, then?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, you'll have to ask the Justice minister.

Mrs. Pitt: Well, it's just hard to imagine that it's being taken care of with such a significant decrease and not really knowing where the increase would have gone to.

Ms Sigurdson: Can you help me understand where the decrease is?

Mrs. Pitt: In 2.4, seniors' community grants, you said that there's a decrease of \$2 million. You said that that was where the funding for elder abuse was.

Ms Sigurdson: Our budget is stable from last year. There is no decrease. It's \$2,607,000, the same as last year. There is no decrease.

Mrs. Pitt: But your budget was the one that decreased the PCs' budget in 2014-15 from \$4.4 million.

Ms Sigurdson: I'm just going to defer to my deputy here.

Mr. Marchand: For the decrease that's shown when you look at the '14-15 actuals across the '15-16 budget, the '14-15 budget was actually the same as the '15-16 budget. There was overexpenditure in that budget line in 2014-15 with funding to the seniors' shelters. That's why that actual shows in '14-15 as higher than the '15-16 number. But the budget approved for '14-15, '15-16, and '16-17 has been consistent at \$2.6 million, and within that, there has been a consistent million dollars for elder abuse each year.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. So the 2014-2015 to '15-16 was the \$2 million decrease, and you are saying that that was for homeless supports. I'm just trying to this figure out.

Mr. Marchand: Within the community grants there are a range of things that are done. There is funding for two seniors' shelters and SAGE in Edmonton and the Kerby Centre in Calgary. The budget line has been consistent through that time. There was some extraordinary extra expenditure in that fiscal year as there was some funding available to meet some specific needs with those two shelters. It wasn't an issue of sort of ongoing operating. It was meeting some particular need at the time. I don't have that in front of me right now.

But to the core of the question, the budget for elder abuse has been consistent through that period of time.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Earlier, when we asked about the review of housing regulations, key strategy 2.1 under the business plan, page 116, you mentioned that you were talking to your government colleagues. What about this committee to review the housing regulations?

Ms Sigurdson: What about what committee?

Mrs. Pitt: Could you use this committee, Families and Communities, to review the housing regulations?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we're making a plan going forward. We don't have a specific plan worked out because it's still being decided, but I'll certainly take that under advisement.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Absolutely. We'd be more than happy to participate in that discussion in a nonpartisan fashion.

I would like to know – or perhaps it's something to consider – how you will ensure that you're going to balance your agenda without bringing it to a committee and so that it's in an open, honest, and transparent way. What steps do you have in place for that?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, our government is very committed to transparency. We can see that indicated by many of the actions we've already taken, and we're open to consultation. I've met with many stakeholders. I've met with my critics in both opposition parties. I certainly want to continue to work in that way. I'm happy to do that, and we will continue to operate in this fashion.

Mrs. Pitt: Earlier today, Minister, you agreed to table documents related to the assessments you conducted on how the carbon tax will affect seniors. I attended a conference, the ASCHA conference in Red Deer, and ministry officials at that time said that there were no such documents. Which is it?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, my understanding is based on income levels, that certainly people receive or don't receive rebates regarding that. We can share that, and that applies to seniors just like any other citizen, whether you're in a facility, a seniors' lodge, or own your own home. That was kind of the information that we can have. Certainly, it's Environment and Parks who's the lead ministry on this file.

Mrs. Pitt: Well, more specifically, the carbon tax will certainly have an impact on seniors' housing where they are not included in the rebate program. Our understanding is that there will be no economic impact study. Is that correct?

Ms Sigurdson: We are working with our housing management bodies and, certainly, affordable housing organizations across the province to support them. We've increased by 2 per cent their operating budgets, that haven't been increased since 2013. We are making a significant capital investment, you know, to address

deferred maintenance and new builds. We're working closely with our partners, and certainly we'll be monitoring the situation, but I think that they are very pleased with the steps that we've taken as a government to support them.

Mrs. Pitt: With all due respect, a 2 per cent increase may not actually offset the impact of the carbon tax to the operation. How will you address that?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I just want you to know that Seniors and Housing is working to ensure renewal projects . . .

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but the time allotted for this portion of the meeting has expired.

I would now like to invite the third-party opposition and the minister to speak for the next 10 minutes.

Mr. Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister. I was going to bring up the same issue that the hon. Member for Airdrie just asked you. I've been in contact with a lot of seniors' care providers, both public and private, and they're concerned about the impact of both the minimum wage increase and the carbon tax. One of the providers said that even with, you know, a slight increase of, like, \$1.50 in the minimum wage, it's going to increase his payroll by a million dollars a year. I'm asking you: what is your ministry doing so that it does not impact the front-line services – your government has ruled that we're not going to touch the front-line services – and eventually does not impact our seniors? Is there any plan in place?

Ms Sigurdson: I just want to address the first part, which is about, you know, addressing sort of the carbon levy and how that will impact people like housing management bodies. I just want you to know that we have some renewal projects and new builds that will include higher energy efficiency and energy savings options. Better windows, higher insulation values, and other energy efficiency options will make greener buildings.

Also, a new public agency will be established to explore, design, and deliver energy efficiency and incentive programs for individuals, businesses, and communities. Certainly, these groups would be able to qualify for that. We are certainly working to support housing management bodies in this regard to make sure that they are able to take advantage of these and cut their costs and their carbon footprint, which we're concerned about.

11:30

In terms of minimum wage we're certainly working with Labour to make sure that housing management bodies are able to provide the services that they need to. That's an ongoing thing, but we are committed as a government to making sure that people who are making minimum wage can care for their families and have monies in their pocket and making sure that they're, you know, able to provide for themselves. In this province with high costs it's important that all workers be able to have that.

Mr. Gill: Thank you.

I just want to add something to that. Based on the information we gathered from the people who are involved, the stakeholders in the senior care facilities, with a \$2 increase in minimum wage the impact on the industry will be approximately \$83 million annually. That's increased payroll. That's a huge number. How is your government going to make sure that – again, at the end of the day, it's about seniors – they don't get impacted? Eighty-three million dollars is going to come out of somebody's pocket. Either the operator is going to have to cut services, which will impact seniors,

or they're going to have to increase their monthly fees, and that, again, is going to impact seniors. Again, do we have any plan, like, a firm plan in place?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, we are working closely with Labour and the housing management bodies to assess how they will be impacted by that, but we are committed to making sure that all Albertans can make a wage that's fair. We are going forward with the minimum wage increase, but we also obviously need to be working with management bodies and the costs for them. We will see how it impacts, but we certainly won't, you know – we will be making sure that we are hearing their concerns if there are any, or maybe there are some benefits to it, too, and they're finding that they are able to manage that.

Mr. Gill: Thank you, hon. minister.

Do you know the timing of the study, when we'll have the study for Albertans or the stakeholders?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, this is ongoing. I meet with, you know, seniors' organizations, housing management bodies, other advocacy groups on an ongoing basis. They're the ones on the front lines. They'll know the information, and we'll certainly be listening to them as time goes on.

Mr. Gill: No, no. I understand that. The minimum wage is going to kick in next year again, then it's going to, you know, impact right away, right? So do we have a plan, like, from January 1, 2017, that we have this in place?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, the Ministry of Labour is working on key indicators to assess things, so I'll, you know, defer to the Minister of Labour to give you the details regarding that. I'll just reiterate that we are going to be working with housing management bodies to see how they're impacted. We certainly in the development of next year's budget, I mean, will take those things into consideration.

Mr. Gill: Okay. The decision to no longer pay tax for the land in municipalities: to your knowledge has this been downloaded onto society? If so, has this caused any hardship?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, you know, this was a cut made by the previous government. When we were reviewing the budget and determining what we could do considering our very difficult fiscal situation, this was one of the cuts that we could not reinstate. We are continuing to not reinstate the grants in place of taxes. I've heard from municipalities regarding some concerns about that, and we are working closely with our partners in the municipal area. But we also have made a significant investment in affordable housing, seniors' housing in municipalities across Alberta. We want to make sure that those front-line services are available for people in those communities, so we've prioritized that. Largely municipalities are understanding this decision. We're moving forward together and working on this issue.

Mr. Gill: You know, Minister, I've been here, as you know, everybody knows, like, only five weeks into the job, and I'm getting the same answer, you know: the previous government, the previous government. I'm just going to read something that somebody sent me. It was by John F. Kennedy. "Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer but the right answer. Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past – let us accept our own responsibility for the future." So let's work together for the future, not blame the last government.

Anyways, let's carry on with the question.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think that we've invested \$1.2 billion over five years, which shows our government's commitment and us creating something much different. So I think that we're fulfilling on that.

Mr. Gill: Understood. Thank you. I appreciate that.

As you know, there is a mention of the arrival of Syrian refugees displaced by the ongoing conflict overseas. I would first like to thank your government for making sure that Alberta was on the leading edge of housing the refugees. Thank you very much. These people need our support, and I feel that Alberta, both the province and its private citizens, stepped up in this time, so thank you. My question, Minister, is: how much funding dedicated to providing affordable housing options for refugees has been provided by the federal government, our federal counterpart? Do you know about that?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, again, this is the Ministry of Labour's responsibility regarding housing. In the first year of settlement the federal government works in partnership with the provinces to settle people, and many of the refugees that came to Alberta were privately sponsored. So then those organizations – sometimes schools, religious groups, just families – are responsible for the funding of the privately sponsored refugees. We did receive 2,761 refugees in Alberta, but I would again refer you to the Minister of Labour regarding those because that's not in my estimates.

Mr. Gill: Understood. All right.

In March 2015 there was \$80 million committed to fund fire and safety upgrades over three years in last year's budget. This was expected to improve nearly 6,500 units. Is your government committing new money to this program, or is it a continuation of the previously announced \$80 million?

Ms Sigurdson: It is continuing that program.

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption; however, the time allotted for this portion of the meeting has expired.

As there is no independent or other member present, we will be moving to government caucus. I invite you now to speak for the next 10 minutes with the minister. Would you like to share your time?

Mr. Shepherd: Yes, please.

The Chair: Thank you. Go ahead.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, I'd like to just take a look, then, at some of the areas under income supplements and grants specifically for seniors. Looking at section 3, page 208 of the estimates, I'd like to just talk about the Alberta seniors' benefit. I understand that it's an income support program. It's there to help low-income seniors in Alberta. It supplements income like old age security, guaranteed income supplement, Canada pension plan. Now, given that we are looking at an increase of about 5,000 more seniors per year, looking at the budget here along section 3, I see we've got an increase of about \$5 million. Minister, do you think this is enough to address the needs of the growing population, considering that we are going to have an expanding seniors' population in the province?

11:40

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Thank you. My ministry forecasts the need each year to determine the appropriate amount of funding required to ensure that we continue to support our vulnerable and low-income seniors. This year's estimates reflect that calculation. So

we've allocated \$270.2 million to support approximately 150,000 low-income seniors each month. On average low-income seniors receive \$140 in financial assistance from the Alberta seniors' benefit program per month. Although our seniors population continues to grow, the Alberta seniors' benefit is for low-income seniors who meet qualifying annual income thresholds. For a single senior the threshold is \$26,400. For a senior couple the threshold is \$43,000. Benefits are provided on a sliding scale. The lower the senior's income, the greater the benefit.

Low-income seniors living in long-term care and designated supportive living receive an additional benefit under the program to ensure that they have at least \$315 in disposable income every month after paying their accommodation charges.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Minister.

Along those lines, then, I realize that you're providing help to low-income seniors. A lot of programs, like the seniors' benefit and special-needs assistance – of course, we are aware now that many seniors are now living longer and living healthier lives. They have some different needs and concerns, and many, of course, as we've discussed earlier, wish to remain independent as long as they are physically able. Just looking at the business plan, then, outcome 1 on page 115, you're capturing some of that dynamic. So considering again the fact that we have a growing seniors population here in the province, could you give us a sense, then, of what other steps your ministry is taking to respond to those needs and how the budget is supporting that?

Ms Sigurdson: Right. The Ministry of Seniors and Housing provides a number of supports for seniors in Alberta: the benefit that we just spoke about, the Alberta seniors' benefit; the seniors' accommodation benefit; the property tax deferral program; the special-needs assistance program; and the recently announced seniors' home adaptation repair program. The Alberta seniors' benefit provides supplemental support for low-income seniors. This program continues to be funded, and we have, of course, no reductions in our program budget this year.

Seniors who wish to remain in their homes but may have specific challenges related to mobility can access the new seniors' home adaptation and repair program. The loan will support seniors to make the necessary renovations to continue to remain independent in their homes and communities.

Services such as housekeeping, snow removal, and yard maintenance, that help seniors in their homes and communities, are eligible for funding through the special-needs assistance program for low-income seniors, again, to support them aging in the community.

Seniors who have difficulty paying their property taxes may apply for a seniors' property tax deferral program to get a low-interest loan, payable when their property is sold, to allow them to remain in their chosen community.

All of these programs support our seniors' aging in the community, and I think, as you've mentioned already, that as our seniors population grows significantly and seniors actually become sort of – there are more older seniors over 75. These programs address a lot of the concerns that would prevent them perhaps from staying in their homes and make sure that they have what they need to be in their communities.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Minister.

I just wanted to ask a bit about your communications budget here. I spent a few years working in the communications field. It's an area of interest of mine, sort of how information is disseminated into the public and how you get the best uptake and get, I guess, the results you want with the best form of communication.

Taking a look here, we've certainly heard that there have been concerns about the somewhat modest enrolment in the property tax deferral program. It suggests that maybe seniors aren't aware of the program and maybe that the communications that are being used aren't the most effective. On page 208, line 1.4, we see the communications line. I'm just wondering if you can give us a bit of a breakdown of how that's operating. Just looking at that, it's interesting to see that it increased significantly with the budget last year, and now we see a small decrease this year. If you could give us a sense, I guess, of how you're using those resources to make sure that we're communicating this information to seniors in the best way.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you. Certainly, there are challenges to making sure that we are reaching as many individuals as we can, and we do try to use as many tools as possible to get the word out to seniors and their families. There are specific issues for communicating with seniors. Many younger seniors, those around 65, are very computer savvy while older seniors still tend to prefer written materials or opportunities to speak with someone in person.

Communications works with the program delivery staff to find the best ways to share information, and through a variety of tools and methods information is shared with Albertans in many ways: websites, social media, print, pamphlets, and brochures. We also promote new programs and services through events and news releases and respond often to media inquiries. Certainly, we work with our partners, you know, in municipalities, in seniors' organizations across the province to make sure that they are aware of these programs, and then they share that with the seniors that they serve.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you.

I was just curious, looking at that: do we know why there was such a large increase or why it was so low before in communications in, I guess, '14-'15, and then we saw the expansion to sort of where we are this year and the previous year?

Ms Sigurdson: The 2016-17 estimate is lower due to the share in the reduction of staffing costs as well as supplies and services. I mean, again, I think that maybe some of it was the stand-alone ministry issue.

Mr. Shepherd: Right. Of course. Thank you, Minister.

I believe Mr. Westhead has a few more questions.

Mr. Westhead: Thank you very much. I got cut off last time, so I'd like to ask the question about the fire and safety upgrades. Measure 1(a) on page 115 of the business plan sets out targets for fire sprinkler and safety upgrades, but I understand that the fire sprinkler upgrades for seniors were first announced back in 2014. I'm just wondering if you can tell us why these facilities didn't have sprinklers already and why it's taking so long to install them.

Ms Sigurdson: The facilities were built before 1990, when the sprinklers became mandatory under Alberta building codes, so we plan to invest \$30 million this year for upgrades, which will accelerate the timelines. Good progress is being made, and we've awarded contracts for government-owned facilities and have grant agreements in place for facilities owned by others. I'm confident that we will reach our goal of making more than 100 facilities safer for our seniors by 2018. These upgrades help to ensure that our seniors feel safe and secure in their homes, and they also provide extra peace of mind for residents and family members.

Mr. Westhead: I'm really glad to hear that we're making some significant progress and putting a lot of attention into that very important aspect.

I'd like to ask you now about the lodge renewal program. As you know, seniors' lodges are obviously a cornerstone of many rural Alberta communities, and these lodges are vital for rural seniors who want to remain in the communities they've lived in for their whole lives and, of course, where their friends and families also live. What kinds of investments does Budget 2016 make to ensure that seniors' lodges remain a part of rural Alberta for generations to come?

Ms Sigurdson: My ministry will invest more than \$196 million for seniors' housing this year and more than \$500 million over the next five years. You can see these figures under capital investment on the Alberta Social Housing Corporation page of the estimates. The funding will be used for ongoing projects, new projects, planning for future projects, and for installing fire sprinklers and safety upgrades in lodges and continuing care facilities. The lodges will be built or upgraded to modern standards and include larger rooms, full ensuite washrooms, and modern fire suppression and safety systems. These improvements will mean so much to our seniors, who want to live in their home communities near family and friends.

Mr. Westhead: Thank you.

I just want to talk now about fiscal efficiencies. I believe that your ministry's budget does the right thing by holding the line on most of the items and, in doing so, provides stable support for Albertans. Of course, in this difficult economic situation all of the ministries have had to be very prudent fiscal managers and look for efficiencies in their budget. Can you tell us how you're able to balance these very difficult priorities?

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you. The vast majority of the Seniors and Housing budget is in direct support for Albertans.

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption; however, the time allotted for this portion of the meeting has expired.

I would now like to invite members from the Official Opposition and the minister to speak for the next 10 minutes. Would you like to go back and forth with the minister?

Mrs. Pitt: Please.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mrs. Pitt: Wonderful. Minister, is your ministry using KPMG and Ernst & Young to manage your projects? Do you know?

Ms Sigurdson: No.

Mrs. Pitt: No? Okay.

I'm going to go back to the Seniors' Advocate. I know that the position is vacant. How are you hiring for this?

Ms Sigurdson: We're going to have an open recruitment process. I just want to, you know, for *Hansard*, I guess, make it clear that even though – we have the Health Advocate covering all of the concerns of seniors across the province, so certainly we are responding to any concerns presented to us. We are having an open recruitment process. I think that the job description was just finalized, and it will be shortly made public.

11:50

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Why is it still vacant? There has been no job posting thus far, so why haven't you been looking for one yet?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think we knew that the concerns of seniors were being addressed. Certainly, it's the same staff that would work for the advocate, whether they are the advocate for Seniors and Health or just the Seniors' Advocate, you know, so all of the

services were in place. Sort of in the transition to our new government we took some time to assess things, but now we are recruiting for that. So the process took a bit of time just to assess where we were going.

Mrs. Pitt: No worries.

Okay. I need your help understanding the business plan at page 117 under revenue, the line item other revenue. What's going on there?

Ms Sigurdson: I'm just going to defer to my deputy minister on this one.

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you.

Mr. Marchand: It would show a few things in the other revenue line. One of them is that there are some recoveries from housing management bodies. Within the social housing system the budgets are set and funding is provided, but if an organization runs a surplus – under the current provisions of the Alberta Housing Act and the associated regulations it's an enclosed system, so that surplus in the body is actually a receivable back to the government, and it's used to offset the deficits in other housing management bodies. That's how the system runs. So that's a fair chunk of what accounts for the other income.

There's also some prior year revenue. When a grant is accrued, for example, and then for whatever reason the accrual doesn't come to pass, other revenue is where it will show up, as prior year revenue from the reversal of an accrual.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. What grants were returned under this, weren't used fully?

Mr. Marchand: It's not a grant per se. Are you thinking, like, of the housing management bodies?

Mrs. Pitt: Yeah.

Mr. Marchand: The housing management bodies present us every year with a budget. We approve their budget, and in many instances, with most of them, that means that we approve that we are underwriting a deficit – right? – that it's going to cost more to operate the housing than they will receive in rent. If, though, at the end of the year, when the books are closed, they have turned a surplus of some amount or they have not fully expended, the grant we paid to them is due as a receivable back to us, and it shows up as that. So that's where that other revenue comes from.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Can you table that, the breakdown?

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. I think we should be able to table the other revenue for the last three years.

Mrs. Pitt: Wonderful. Thank you very much.

I would like to defer the rest of my time to my colleague from Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead.

Mr. Yao: Thank you, Chair. Minister, at estimates page 208, operating expense, line 3.3, the seniors' supplementary accommodations benefit has increased by almost \$15 million in the last two years. Can you explain this, please?

Ms Sigurdson: The supplementary accommodations benefit is income based and provides a monthly income supplement to

support affordable accommodation costs for residents of long-term care and designated living. The increase is primarily needed to shelter low-income seniors in long-term care and designated supportive living from the 3 per cent long-term care accommodation charge increase scheduled for July 1, 2016.

Mr. Yao: I was wondering if you could explain your measures with this. Can you tell us how many more people are accessing this supplement, and do we know why there are more people accessing this supplement?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, the increase is because of the increase in the long-term accommodation charge – right? – so that's why there is that increase.

I'm going to defer. There's a bit more information from my deputy.

Mr. Marchand: About 12,000 seniors access that benefit. Its growth in the number reflects two factors. As the minister pointed out, there is the increase in the accommodation rates, our cost per case against the 12,000 people who receive it. It becomes a little more expensive to ensure that they're left with \$315 at the end of the month after their rent is paid. The other thing that causes it to grow is the new spaces that come online, right? As new long-term care and supportive living spaces are built and opened, we get new clients coming into the program.

Mr. Yao: I see. That said, what is the status of the final ASLI-funded projects? Your predecessor decided to fund some final projects. What's the status of those?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the ASLI program is now the responsibility of Health – right? – so the Minister of Health could better answer that. Certainly, of the 31 projects that were approved by the previous government, 25 are going ahead. That was announced in the fall. In this budget the program has been transferred. That's why there's no line item for ASLI in the Seniors and Housing ministry.

Mr. Yao: One last question. Fort McMurray was hurt a little bit, a little bit of a setback here recently. I want to know if there are any assurances about the seniors' facility that would be built at Willow Square. What's the status of that? Is that going to continue forward? I see you do have some preliminary money budgeted for it, and in three years the final funds are there, but the folks in Fort McMurray would like some assurances that this will get built despite the current setback in the region.

Ms Sigurdson: That is the plan of our ministry, to go forward with that facility, and certainly please accept my condolences. Of course, your community has been devastated by fire. Our condolences go out to you and the people of Fort McMurray. We will certainly do everything we can to support, you know, any kind of longer term housing. I mean, obviously, we're still at the stage of just the emergency and short-term sort of response, but my ministry will be working with the people in Fort McMurray and assuring that things will go forward.

Certainly, in terms of the specific ask about the seniors' lodge, there may be other things to consider, but that is the plan currently for this ministry.

Mr. Yao: Thank you.

I'd like to cede the last minute to the hon. members from the PC caucus.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to invite you to speak for the remainder of the time for this meeting.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you. Minister, first what I've got is a comment, really, about housing affordability versus affordable housing. We've had a lot of conversation today on affordable housing. A lot of our partners that we've talked to, both in the private and nonprofit sectors, have some deep concerns about possible changes to the Municipal Government Act and how that might affect housing affordability. I just wanted to share with you that there are some significant concerns on the opening of some doors that might layer on additional costs to all housing providers, both for affordable housing and market and near-market housing as well.

My last question to you relates to one of the answers you gave with respect to a stated preference, not a complete move away from other forms of partnerships but a preference for public ownership and operation. I'm going to assume that that means a preference also for unionized employees. Minister, is that a correct assumption on my part although you did state that you would continue to look at partnerships in the private and nonprofit sectors?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, yes, we are working with all stakeholders in the private and nonprofit sectors, and we want to make sure that, you know, projects run in a fair way, that all employees are treated well.

Mr. Gotfried: But, Minister, you stated earlier, I think, that there was a preference within your department and within your government for public ownership and operation. Could you confirm that?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes, there is a preference for that.

Mr. Gotfried: So we can assume that the bulk of funding going forward is likely to move towards that model. Is that correct?

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this item of business has concluded.

I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet again this afternoon at 3:30 to consider the estimates for the Ministry of Status of Women.

I would like to thank the minister and her staff for coming to join us this morning.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

