



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Standing Committee
on
Finance

Department of Service Alberta
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, February 15, 2012
6:30 p.m.

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Fifth Session**

Standing Committee on Finance

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Also in Attendance

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[Mr. Renner in the chair]

**Department of Service Alberta
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The Chair: Okay. I think we're all set to go. I want to call this committee to order and welcome everyone here. As I said earlier today, this is the first time that I've been on this side of the table, and it's the first time for the minister to be on that side of the table, so we both have a learning experience tonight.

I want to, before we get into introductions, just point out to the members something that's very important that apparently we learned last night. These microphones are controlled at the back of the room, so please don't try and turn your microphone on and off. It'll be done for you. Try to minimize the actual moving around of the mikes as well. It's not necessary. They'll work just fine.

We're here this evening to consider the estimates of the Department of Service Alberta for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013. Just a reminder to all members that the only people who are recognized by the chair and who will be allowed to speak around the table are the members.

I'm going to ask everyone to do self-introduction in a moment. Minister, if you would introduce yourself and the staff that are with you, and then I'll have the rest of the members around the table introduce themselves.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. It's my pleasure to be here this evening. It is, indeed, my first time on this side of the table. I never quite realized how scary six men staring at you in the same way could be.

I am the Minister of Service Alberta. Accompanying me today is my deputy minister, Doug Lynkowski; our director of communications, Gerald Kastendieck. We have Althea Hutchinson, Jennifer Gleave, and Steve Burford. Then we have an entourage of other staff members who wanted to see me in performance: my executive assistant, Emir; we have another ADM, Janet Skinner; we have Matthew MacDonald, Brian Fischer, and Bruce McDonald joining us this evening as well. I'd like to thank them all for their participation in getting me equipped and all the fine work they do in our department.

The Chair: Thanks, Minister.

Just before I have the members introduce themselves, I want to read for the record that pursuant to Standing Order 56(2.1), (2.3) Mr. Barry McFarland is substituting for Mr. Len Mitzel tonight, for the information of all members.

Maybe we'll start with Mr. Allred, if you would introduce yourself, and we'll just go around the room.

Mr. Allred: Ken Allred, St. Albert.

Mr. Knight: Good evening. Mel Knight, Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Prins: Good evening. It's Ray Prins, constituency of Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Drysdale: Wayne Drysdale, Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Sandhu: Good evening. Peter Sandhu, MLA, Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. McFarland: I'm Barry McFarland from Little Bow.

Mr. Kang: Darshan Kang, MLA for Calgary-McCall, critic for Service Alberta.

Mr. Fawcett: Kyle Fawcett, Calgary-North Hill.

The Chair: All right. Thank you very much.

I just want to outline the rules that we'll be operating under tonight. I want to get them on the record and make sure that everyone clearly understands how the committee will be operating tonight.

Government Motion 6 and Standing Order 59.01(4) describe the sequence as follows: the minister or the member of the Executive Council acting on behalf of the minister may make opening comments not to exceed 10 minutes; for the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister or member of the Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf may speak; for the next 20 minutes members of the third party, the Wildrose Party in this case, if any, and the minister or the member of the Executive Council acting on his behalf may speak; for the next 20 minutes the members of the fourth party, the NDs, if any, and the minister may speak; the next 20 minutes is allocated for members of any other opposition party or independent members, if any, and the minister may speak. That's 20 minutes. At the end of that time any member may speak for the rest of the evening.

Committee members, ministers, and other members who are not committee members may also participate.

Department officials and members' staff may be present but may not address the committee.

Members may speak more than once; however, speaking time is limited to 10 minutes at a time.

A minister and a member may combine their time for a total of 20 minutes. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their speech if they plan to combine their time with the minister's time.

Three hours have been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Department of Service Alberta. If the debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the department's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and we will adjourn; otherwise, we will adjourn at 9:30 p.m.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, but I point out that the clock will continue to run.

The vote on the estimates is deferred until consideration of all department estimates has concluded and will occur in Committee of Supply on March 13, 2012, again pursuant to Government Motion 6.

I also have some information here regarding amendments, but I'm advised by the clerk that amendments, that were required to be written, were not submitted, so we don't have to deal with any amendments tonight.

So with that, Mr. Minister, I will turn it over to you, and you have 10 minutes in which to give us a background on your department.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for the opportunity to present the 2012-13 estimates of the Ministry of Service Alberta. I would like to talk more broadly about the ministry's focus this coming fiscal year and mention a couple of highlights from the fiscal year coming to a close. Among our other work it is notable to mention that in 2011-12 Service Alberta expanded the veterans' licence plate program to include motorcycles as a small but important gesture to honour our veterans. In addition, we introduced the home inspection business regulation to protect Albertans who rely on an inspection

when making this very significant purchase. In fact, it's the largest purchase most Albertans will ever make in their lives.

On a special note I want to take this opportunity to thank employees of Service Alberta who went above and beyond the call of duty to support the government's response to the Slave Lake crisis last year.

In 2012-13 we will continue improving customer and consumer protection, streamlining government services to reduce costs, and expanding high-speed Internet access for rural Albertans. To that end, Mr. Chairman, you should know that Service Alberta recently negotiated a new agreement that will consolidate the purchasing of wireless products and services across government. The agreement is expected to save government \$6 million to \$8 million once fully implemented. What's even more promising is the fact that we are making the agreement available to municipalities, school boards, and health and postsecondary institutions so they can also take advantage of our preferred pricing. Using this government's purchasing agreement and many others that Service Alberta has procured makes good economic sense for Alberta taxpayers.

Mr. Chairman, the budget for Service Alberta supports the government's theme of investing in people. Many of the services that are important to Albertans are facilitated or supported by my department. Service Alberta touches the lives of Albertans every day, whether it is through providing services directly to Albertans or through the critical support we provide to other government ministries. Our work is often behind the scenes, but it has a significant impact on the day-to-day life of Albertans as well as the ability of the government as a whole to operate efficiently and effectively.

6:40

Programs the ministry delivers for Albertans include registries, more than 8 million registry transactions each year, approximately 15 transactions per minute; business licensing; landlord and tenant dispute resolution services; vital statistics; consumer protection enforcement – last year, for example, we received 120 some-odd thousand consumer calls – and many other services.

Services provided to government include technology support, procurement services, interdepartmental mail and courier services, payroll, accounts payable, records management, and government libraries. The ministry's vision is clear: one government, one enterprise, one employer driving innovation and excellence in service delivery.

Service Alberta's business plan outlines goals and priority initiatives for the next three years that link closely with the priorities assigned to me by the Premier as well as the government's overall strategic plan.

A large part of our ministry's work involves protecting consumers. This year we plan to modernize the Condominium Property Act to enhance consumer protection and stimulate a vibrant condominium industry in Alberta. We plan to modernize the Fair Trading Act to address emerging market issues, including new home warranty and fair contracting; implement legislative changes for employment agencies to further protect workers from unfair business practices; continue to protect consumers by investigating and prosecuting cases of unfair practices; and continue to raise awareness with Albertans of the services available to them through the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate.

We have initiatives planned for the next three years to ensure that Albertans have access to convenient and efficient services, including working with our partner ministries to enhance the programs and services website, which is the government's single window for online access to service for Albertans; continuing our work to support vulnerable Albertans by providing a single point

of access to services and information through the Alberta Supports website; working with our registry partners on finding ways to improve registry services for Albertans; and we plan to upgrade the vital statistics registry system to meet the requirements of the planned changes to the Vital Statistics Act.

To help Albertans who intend to register a corporation, we are working to harmonize corporate registration requirements between Alberta, B.C., and Saskatchewan as part of the New West Partnership initiative. We will initiate upgrading the land titles registry system to accept electronic document submission. We will develop a digital framework to foster innovation in how services are received by Albertans. Mr. Chair, these are just a few examples of how we will continue improving services for Albertans.

Of course, a major priority this year, as outlined in my mandate letter, is to work with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to increase access to high-speed Internet for rural Albertans through the final mile rural connectivity initiative. There are some parts of the province that are still unserved because they are remote or sparsely populated. That's what our final mile rural connectivity initiative is focusing on. The challenge is to find the best way to enable the private sector to close these gaps and bring sustainable broadband access to all parts of the province. We need to make sure we do it right for Albertans, for communities driving economic and social sustainability, and for industry, who have invested in bringing services to where they are today.

We are currently getting a more complete understanding of Alberta's situation and solid options to enhance rural broadband availability. The government has been working with the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties, the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, and other stakeholders to pinpoint exactly where the gaps in service are. An expression of interest gathered input from industry and stakeholders on the most effective approaches to close these gaps.

Through the final mile rural connectivity initiative, the government is providing funding to cover a portion of project costs for municipalities, bands, and Métis settlements and has plans ready to expand high-speed Internet access in their communities. We're also taking the input from the expression of interest and preparing a request for comments, which will have a draft request for proposals, on the overall strategy to reach our goal of ensuring that at least 98 per cent of Albertans have high-speed Internet access. I am confident that we will reach this goal.

Service Alberta also provides standard core shared services to ministries. Ministries rely on our services for their daily operations. For example, we deliver their mail – more than 18 million pieces go through our system – deliver library books for 96 locations across Alberta, ensure that their computers are running, and help them purchase goods and services. The ministry works across government to facilitate government programs and service delivery, reducing duplication of services which ultimately better serves the public.

In the business plan there are a number of priority initiatives related to shared services over the next three years. Government contracts will continue to be simplified and improved to make it easier for companies to bid for government business. We will work collaboratively with other levels of government to strategically leverage the government of Alberta's buying power. Discussions have already begun with some of our federal and municipal counterparts. We will look for sustainable ways of moderating and satisfying increasing demand of our core shared services.

Through our corporate information security office . . .

The Chair: I'm sorry. The time allotted for introductory comments has expired.

We will now move into the hour that is allocated to the Official Opposition. Mr. Kang, I assume you will be the representative?

Mr. Kang: Yes, sir.

The Chair: As I indicated at the outset, you can speak for up to 10 minutes and then allow the minister to respond, or you can agree to combine the time and have a to-and-fro for the entire time.

Mr. Kang: Yeah. We can go back and forth.

The Chair: You'll be going back and forth?

Mr. Kang: Yes, we will.

The Chair: Okay. That's fine. We'll start the clock, then. You'll have one hour. You don't have to use the hour, but if you choose to, it's up to you.

Mr. Kang: You'd like to go home early?

Thank you, Mr. Minister and all your support staff, for being here today. I think I will be easy on you. You didn't need all the staff, like I said earlier. If you wish to, you can let them go, and we can just go at it. We don't need everybody here.

Thanks for covering the veterans and the home inspection regulation. My heart goes out to the Slave Lave residents, what happened. That was very tragic. I'm glad, you know, that there were no lives lost – that cannot be replaced; materialistic things can be replaced – so I thank God for that.

Coming back to the briefs, I'll go right into it. In goal 1 you talk about high-speed Internet, and we talked about this last year, too. There's no set deadline of when a hundred per cent of Albertans will be covered with this. You talked about providing the funding. What is the deadline, and how much is it going to cost us? Is there some kind of figure there, some kind of estimate, within the budget? Those are my questions on the high-speed Internet.

6:50

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, hon. member, for those questions. This is a rather significant challenge. Alberta has a very vast landscape. We are a very, very large province. So that's issue 1. Issue 2 is the actual geographical makeup of the province. You can have a location where you have Internet service, and less than one kilometre away there can be homes where they don't have access to Internet service just because of the geography in between a tower and a home, so a hill or a crevice – there could be a whole series of reasons why – a mountain. So that poses very significant challenges to complete the remaining portion.

Alberta started out as being a leader by creating the Alberta SuperNet. I mean, that's something that we should be proud of. The government and industry worked together. The Alberta government at that time – I was not a member at that time – had great foresight to move forth with the SuperNet. So we have over 400 communities that are connected with actual fibre in the ground. I think it's 426 communities that are connected with fibre in the actual ground.

What's happened since then is a lot of Internet service providers – I think over 50 private companies – have leveraged that technology and that fibre that is in the ground to provide services to further communities and outlying areas. Now, that has covered a large percentage of the population; however, it hasn't covered areas such as what I just described, you know, areas where there are geographical challenges, number one. The second thing that it

hasn't covered is areas that have really low residential concentrations. That's essentially an area where you have less than four homes per square kilometre. In those areas there have been very significant challenges in providing services because the Internet service providers just tell us that the economics don't make sense. The cost to put the technology in, whether it be wireless or to actually put fibre in the ground, cannot be recovered by servicing two, three, or four homes or one home within a square kilometre. So that's where we have some challenges: the geography and, number two, the residential densities.

Now, my plan to deal with this is essentially threefold. The first is to work with our municipal partners. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development started this process already. What we've done is we have put a call out to our rural partners to say: do you have plans in place today that we can help support to provide service and connect the final dots in providing high-speed Internet service in your jurisdiction? That's the first part. It's working with municipalities that already have plans in place.

The second part is to look at geographical areas where we believe that the residential densities are so low that perhaps only a satellite solution will work. That's step 2.

Step 3 is to go out to the remaining Internet service providers and say: okay; you tell us how and where you will fill in the dots. It's very important that we pinpoint the areas that we need serviced because what we don't want is to support any initiatives that duplicate services. We don't want to offer any sort of incentive to a company to provide duplicate services in an area where they're already receiving Internet service. So that's why it takes a little bit of time.

Now, I can assure you that progress on this file is being made very rapidly. The municipal program with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has already been started. The second phase on the low-density areas will commence in the very near future. Even the third part of this program will take shape, I presume, by the end of this year.

Now, it'll all be done through a competitive RFP process, whereby we solicit, you know, proposals from companies that fill in the service where we need it.

Mr. Kang: So far there's no proposals that have come in, or you haven't asked for any bidders to come in?

Mr. Bhullar: Yes, we have, through the municipal program, as I said. That was our step 1, so that has commenced. That has started.

Mr. Kang: Have you put some kind of deadline on this by when it will be done? Every year we hear the same story, that we are going at it as fast as we can, and those poor Albertans still have no access to the SuperNet.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, for municipalities they have until March 31 to come back with proposals. So step 1 is under way. At present we have municipalities that are coming up with proposals. Step 2, you know, the low-density areas, where likely satellite is the only solution, will take place in short order as well.

I don't know if you're interested, hon. member, but the number of dollars that we have allocated to this specific area for this year is \$9.5 million.

Mr. Kang: Okay. That was my question there, too.

Coming to goal 1, 1.2 is to develop a digital framework for Alberta that leverages enabling technologies to foster innovation in how services are received by Albertans and delivered by the government and establish a strategic vision and direction for the

SuperNet beyond 2015. What is that strategic vision there, and what kind of direction are you looking at after 2015 for the SuperNet?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, hon. member, as you are well aware, we live in an ever-changing digital world. Things change rapidly. Things change quicker than you and I can, well, quite frankly, clap our hands. I see Alberta as being a leader when Alberta came forth with the SuperNet. The questions I'm posing to my department officials and to industry and to Albertans as a whole now are: well, what will the needs of the new digital economy in a few years from now look like? It's not just high-speed Internet that we need to connect in rural Alberta. What else will we need? What other needs will our postsecondary institutions have? What other needs will we as a government need to fulfill in serving Albertans? I mean, I'm looking for a very well-thought-out digital framework that asks those questions.

Then to answer those questions, we'll have to look at the infrastructure we have in place today and see how we can best leverage that. We know we have wonderful infrastructure in place. The SuperNet is absolutely wonderful infrastructure that we have in place, but what we'll need to do to answer those questions is to look at other infrastructure as well, look at other commercial infrastructure that's in place and see how all of that can be leveraged to ensure that we become one of the most highly connected jurisdictions in North America.

At present the operating contract for the SuperNet will come up in 2015, so that's why you see the 2015 timeline there. At that point there'll be an open, competitive process to find another service provider to provide that service.

Mr. Kang: Thank you. Coming to goal 1.3, you're talking about upgrading the land titles registry system to accept electronic document submissions. How much is that going to cost? Will the cost be passed on to the consumer? How are we going to do that?

7:00

Mr. Bhullar: Thanks, hon. member. We have in this year's budget \$8 million that's allocated for capital investments to upgrade our registry information systems. This is year 1 of a five-year process to upgrade our systems, and this particular initiative will be funded through that funding.

Mr. Kang: So there will be no cost passed on to the consumer?

Mr. Bhullar: No, sir.

Mr. Kang: Okay. You go on to talk in goal 1 about harmonizing corporate registration requirements between Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan as part of the New West Partnership initiative. You know, when we harmonize everything, what kind of mechanism are you going to have in place to secure all the information? Is there some kind of system that's going to be in place so that the information is not hacked into?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, when a corporate registry is made in Saskatchewan or British Columbia, we also need to update that here in our systems right now. Now, it's my understanding that at present this is actually being done through paper whereby jurisdictions, provinces send hard copies of this information from one province to the next to update our systems. We're going to see if we can find some more effective ways to do this with our partners, British Columbia and Saskatchewan.

The New West Partnership is something that we should be very proud of. You know, we the three western provinces have led

Canada on that, and now this is a part of finding ways to ensure that we can best respond to that. As I said, right now we're doing it through hard copy, actual papers that are sent between jurisdictions, and we'll see what better ways we can deal with this.

It'll be also dealing with things like standardizing forms between the three provinces, standardizing templates between the three provinces so that the forms in B.C. are the same as the forms in Alberta and so on.

Mr. Kang: Thank you.

Okay. Coming to performance measure 1(c), the percentage of Albertans who are satisfied with access to government of Alberta services and information, that actual is 68 per cent for the year 2010-11. I don't see, you know, the year 2011-12 number there. We've got a target for 2012-13, 80 per cent. I mean, from 2010-11 we want to jump to an 80 per cent target in 2012-13. That looks like a very optimistic kind of target. Do you have the number in between, for 2011-12?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, this survey is done every two years, hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Oh. Okay. Sorry.

Mr. Bhullar: I guess I'm an optimistic sort of guy if you think it's an optimistic target. I mean, we provide good service, and we're going to provide better service, and we'll keep moving in that direction.

Mr. Kang: Okay. Then under goal 2 – I'll come back to the condominiums and fair trading later on – 2.3 is to implement legislative changes for employment agencies and settlement services to protect Albertans from predatory practices by irresponsible businesses. What are those changes, and how will those legislative changes be implemented?

Mr. Bhullar: We in Alberta rely on a fair number of temporary foreign workers. In addition to that, we know that there are many challenges in finding workers, so a lot of folks rely on employment agencies. What we've found is that there are a lot of individuals and families that also rely on employment agencies, and unfortunately not all employment agencies were created equal. Some engage in practices that I consider to be unfair, unjust, and I think most Albertans would consider them to be unfair and unjust as well. I plan on proposing changes in this area to better protect Albertans. Now, this is something that I started work on immediately after becoming the minister.

In the past as a department we've acted in many ways. People have been fined, and we've prosecuted people. We've cancelled agency licences, and we'll continue to do that. Last year the department conducted 67 investigations. But I think there are some areas that require changes. Now, at present, hon. member, I'm not going to get into all the details of the changes that we'll be making because they're coming forth in due course, but I'll give you one example. It's illegal for somebody to charge money from a job seeker to get them a job. Something that we've noticed is that instead of charging money from the job seeker, they've charged money from the job seeker's husband or brother or wife. In many cases, actually, they've charged money from the job seeker's relatives in Canada while the job seeker is actually in India or the Philippines or a temporary foreign worker from Hong Kong even. That's one of the areas I look to address in this.

I also look to address issues of how they market themselves. For example, there have been some agencies that have shown a government licence to be an endorsement from government. Now,

we would assume that most people would understand the difference between a business licence from a government and an endorsement from a government, but unfortunately a lot of vulnerable people out there have actually suffered quite a bit because of these distinctions. These are some of the examples of areas that I'll be looking to address with some changes.

Mr. Kang: Well, I commend you for that because that's a big problem, those agencies charging people money.

Mr. Bhullar: I can say that I think that even from your own constituency, hon. member, I've probably received a few phone calls in this area, so this is something we need to tighten up, and we absolutely will.

The Chair: Minister and Mr. Kang, that's a 20-minute marker. You still have two more to go if you wish to use them. We'll just reset it for another 20 minutes and see how it goes.

Mr. Kang: We've barely started. We can't go home early.

Mr. Sandhu: You've got time for the tunnel, too, in there. Talk about the tunnel.

Mr. Kang: I'll get there, too. It's being built.

Coming back to procurement, the re-engineering initiative, what kind of outcomes did you have from this initiative? Is it producing any results? What kind of results are we getting from it? How is it improving the procurement process?

Mr. Bhullar: The example I provided in my opening statement of new wireless contracts is an example of this initiative's work. Really, hon. member, what we aim to do is to ensure that we're getting the best value for the government's dollars when it comes to procurement. Mobile wireless was one example. We looked at the contracts and said: could we do better? We went out to the market, and we, in fact, did better. Not only did we do better for the government of Alberta, but we've done better for, essentially, municipalities, hospitals, health authorities, postsecondary institutions, school boards. Everybody can capitalize on that.

7:10

Mr. Kang: Everything has come under this umbrella of Service Alberta?

Mr. Bhullar: What we've done is that Service Alberta went out and got a new contract for mobile wireless services, and we were able to pass those savings on. A better way to put it is that other sectors, like universities for example, are able to get the same rate that we've negotiated. So not only will the government of Alberta potentially save \$6 million to \$8 million on this, but we'll also be able to pass those savings on to these other sectors.

Now, this is just one example of the types of things that we're doing in the procurement initiative. Another is the use of our P card, as we call them, government MasterCards. Right now I estimate that it can cost us about \$70 to process an invoice because everything is done through paper. Strategic use of our government card will eliminate that cost and reduce it very, very significantly. We've started implementing the use of these cards, and we want to go further. I mean, there are definite savings to be had by using this.

Other areas in this are standardizing contracts, whereby we minimize legal risk and make it easier for businesses to bid. We are looking to essentially create a contracting centre of excellence within the department that provides input and solutions to other departments when we are in fact contracting for services to once

again minimize legal risk, make it easier for businesses, and reduce the amount of time that we have to devote to a lot of contracting.

Now, another example of work in this area is on the IT side. By standardizing IT equipment, for example, first of all, we get a better rate on the products. If we know that we're buying 1,000 of item A, we're going to get a better rate as opposed to buying 300 of item A. We're trying to standardize and use more of the same products throughout government.

The second area where we're going to save money is not just on the purchase of those items, but we'll also be saving money on the servicing of those items and the support on those items. Contracts for supports and for helpdesks, for example, on laptops or software: if people are using more of the same type of software and hardware, then the contract on the servicing of that and the helpdesk will also be cheaper. These are examples of some of the things we're doing. Others are software agreements, where we're trying to work on the same software platforms, and I think that will produce very significant savings.

One last thing, before I turn the floor back over to you, is that we have about 185 standing offers. What that means is that if in government we've determined that government departments purchase a lot of glasses, we'll go to RFP, find the best rate on products that we need, and then that standing offer is available to all government departments and, potentially, even other organizations. In most cases there are about 300 other organizations that can access these standing offers, and that rate is always available to them then.

I hope that we will see that number of standing offers of 185 go up very significantly. I want to see us doing more bulk purchasing so that we can then share the savings with other departments, with all GOA, and other publicly funded sectors like universities and postsecondaries.

Mr. Kang: In the future are you going to have some mechanism, you know, to measure and report progress in future business plans and annual reports on how much money you've been saving from this initiative? Do you have something in place?

Mr. Bhullar: Hon. member, I'd love to find a way to track this – not to track it but to showcase these savings. I mean, I don't know exactly where that mechanism is, but that's absolutely something I believe we need to do because it's a matter of fostering that culture of looking for savings.

Mr. Kang: The only way you will know how much we have saved from this initiative, you know, is if you have something in place.

Okay. Now, coming to goal 3.6, to continue to migrate government ministries onto the shared technology infrastructure and standardized technology services, how many ministries have already been integrated?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, at present about 80 per cent of government users are on the same platform. We have three ministries, I believe, that are not: Energy, Education, and Human Services. These three are not. We are working with them to bring all three of them in line within, I'd say, a two-year period. Within about an 18-month period all of those will be working in line as well.

Mr. Kang: Okay. We're going to speed things up. Don't worry. On 3.7, continue to apply the greening government strategy to various aspects of the ministry's services such as procurement, fleet management, surplus sales, and print services, my concern is about the greening of the fleet. How are we doing on that front, as a matter of fact?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, the government fleet has about 3,200 vehicles. I believe we have about 90 to 100 or so hybrids. I know you're a big fan of hybrids. I recall you asking questions to the previous minister about the number of hybrids. I'll say that where they're of best use, I think people should deploy them. I think this is an ongoing process. Greening government doesn't happen overnight. I think it's an ongoing process, one that we'll always continue to focus on.

There are examples of this other than vehicles, hon. member. For example, in our surplus area 291 tonnes of scrap metal were recycled. I think that's quite significant. Nearly 13,000 end-of-life computers and other electronics were recycled; 3,781 government surplus items, instead of being discarded, were redeployed back into use. Almost 10,000 computers and related equipment were donated to Computers for Schools. So this is all stuff that could have ended up in the . . .

Mr. Kang: This is from the government only?

Mr. Bhullar: Sorry?

Mr. Kang: This is not from all Alberta; this is just from the government?

Mr. Bhullar: This is just us, just government. Yes. This is just government. This is an example of things that could have very easily ended up in landfills, that we found ways to redeploy either into classrooms, where needed, in schools or just ensuring that they're recycled in an appropriate manner.

Mr. Kang: Now, this brings another question to mind. Are we thinking about recycling? Sure, we recycle computers now. You know, I don't necessarily relate it to your ministry, but are we thinking about bringing computers to, say, recycling depots in smaller rural areas? Are we looking at that? Now they bring bottles only and milk jugs and all of that. Are we thinking about expanding that so that people can bring their computers or printers to the recycling depots?

7:20

Mr. Bhullar: You know, that's not within the purview of my department. I mean, the examples I gave you were all items that were surplus; surplus is something that my department deals with. Items that are surplus in government are what we deal with, and we're redeploying them as best we can and recycling them where necessary.

Mr. Kang: Okay. Back to the provincial motor vehicle database. I'll give a little bit of background here. Alberta introduced a \$15 motor vehicle search fee for municipalities and police in Budget 2011. The fee came in, as we all know, April 1, 2011, and it was opposed by the municipalities and the Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police because it was going to cost them \$25 million annually from police budgets across the province. In Edmonton and Calgary it was estimated that the fee would cost each city about \$10 million a year. It was short lived, and then it was cancelled. Service Alberta's justification for the fee was that increased usage of this motor vehicle database had led to higher costs for the province. Just how much have costs actually increased for the database?

The Calgary mayor has openly questioned that \$15 charge. He says that it should only cost pennies for a computer to talk to another computer, right? I don't want to read the whole thing here. In the end we as the Alberta Liberals echoed calls for the fees to be axed, and the previous minister kept putting it off. Then Budget

2012 saw our new minister here make good on the promise and not introduce this controversial fee.

According to a January 10, 2012, *Metro* Calgary story Service Alberta claimed that the costs of running a provincial motor vehicle database have risen more than 116 per cent since 2002. Given that such a claim implies a knowledge of how much it cost to run the motor vehicle database in 2002, can the minister tell us what that figure was in 2002?

Mr. Bhullar: The 2002 figure to run the database?

Mr. Kang: Yeah.

Mr. Bhullar: I can get you that figure, hon. member. I'll provide that to you as best as possible. The fact is that our databases require work like any other databases. It's not a question of what it costs for two computers to simply talk to each other; it's also a question of what it costs to keep all the information in a system, to keep the system running, to add new information to the system, to replace information in a system.

I mean, we have thousands and thousands and thousands of entries into these systems, and essentially we pay for that today. The government of Alberta pays for that today, and others are accessing that information free of charge, essentially.

Mr. Kang: That fee was a search fee. You know, the information was there anyway, so it was not costing the government extra to store that information. That \$15 search fee was just like a surcharge, a tax on a tax.

You know, when we talk about that database costs have risen 116 per cent, we must base this on some figure like from the year 2002. There must be some number there when we are comparing that since 2002 our database costs have risen 116 per cent.

Mr. Bhullar: We'll get you that 2002 number. I'm not sure where you're quoting that number from, but we'll get the 2002 number.

Mr. Kang: That was in the Calgary *Metro* story, so it must have come from somewhere.

Okay. The second question is: what was responsible for that cost escalation? Was it new equipment or a whole bunch of other factors?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, a lot of our databases are not new. They're actually quite old, so they require a very significant amount of upkeep to operate. Thousands of transactions every single year in the motor vehicle system: that requires a very significant commitment as well to ensure that it's updated and it's running the way it should be.

In addition to that, hon. member, there are actual contractual costs. Some of these contractual costs to upkeep the databases have provisions in them that require further dollars. These are contracts that are signed. It is aging technology, and it costs significant money to maintain. We're updating and modernizing this as best as possible, and we have money in our capital budget for these very initiatives.

Mr. Kang: It's just that the \$15 motor vehicle search fee is missing from the 2012 budget. The reason for the \$15 surcharge fee was the costs, you know. The cost of the database didn't go up overnight. Since we are now not charging the \$15 fee – you know, it's gone – can you comment on what other options are being explored at this time to maintain funding for the database?

Mr. Bhullar: The government of Alberta, the province, is paying for it. We're paying for it. Over the next five years, as I talked

about earlier, we have \$8 million each year coming forth to update these databases. It's a service that we provide for ourselves and for others such as municipalities and police agencies. It's something we do and will continue to do.

Mr. Kang: I'm coming back to that again. I'm having trouble with this. Since it appears that Service Alberta was able forgo the revenue from this now-defunct \$15 fee without too much difficulty, can the minister explain why it was deemed a necessity in the first place?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, hon. member, I'm not going to comment on decisions made previous to my being here. The fact of the matter is that there are escalating costs in running some of this technology.

The Chair: That's the second 20-minute marker, so we'll reset the clock one more time. You're in your final 20 minutes.

Mr. Bhullar: As I was saying, I mean, there's aging technology.

Mr. Kang: I knew that you were going to give me that answer.

Mr. Bhullar: Sir, that's the answer.

Mr. Kang: Thank you.

Mr. Bhullar: The fact is that we have to keep it going, and we're keeping it going.

Mr. Kang: Okay, coming to privacy breaches, the Personal Information Protection Act. In May 2010 under the Personal Information Protection Act it became mandatory for companies to report privacy breaches. Currently there are no penalties for noncompliance. The Information and Privacy Commissioner has said that this proves how serious and widespread the problem is and that the time has come for the province to consider amending the legislation to allow for penalties, with monetary fines being seen as the most effective solution. This was an *Edmonton Journal* story.

7:30

Yet 90 breach reports had been received by the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner in 16 months. That's prior to May 2010. They agree that companies are not doing enough to adequately safeguard their customers' personal information, and introducing fines would go a long way towards changing the behaviour and encouraging compliance with the Personal Information Protection Act. There is another one on August 26, 2011. The office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner said that it had received 90 reports of privacy breaches. Then it became mandatory for a company to report privacy breaches starting May 2010. There are currently no penalties again here. Does the minister agree that the Personal Information Protection Act should be amended to allow the penalization of the company that loses customer information?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, hon. member, I want to start off by saying that we are one of three provinces in Canada that has personal information protection legislation that deals with the private sector. That alone is a very significant step. Secondly, I believe we're the only province in the country that has mandatory breach notification, where when a company had a breach of personal information, they're required to notify us, the commissioner, and the commissioner then determines how they need to rectify that situation. I think that we are at present pushing forth and leading

the way when it comes to this. I mean, as I said, we're the only jurisdiction in Canada that has mandatory breach notification. I think, if I remember correctly, we're one of the few jurisdictions in North America that has this mandatory breach notification that applies to the private sector.

Now, with respect to moving further, I mean, I'm always open to ideas on how we can better protect information for consumers. This is an ever-changing area of law as well, hon. member. There was a Supreme Court case that came forth, I believe, just a couple of months ago dealing with some Alberta companies. This is an area that is continuously evolving. Privacy laws are something that are making their way through various stages of our court system. It's an area that's always changing, and I'm always open to look at better ways.

Mr. Kang: Even for penalties?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, as I said, you know, I'm open to looking at more ideas.

Mr. Kang: A slap on the wrist doesn't cut it.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, sir, I think it could be much more than a slap on the wrist, but as I said, I'm open to new ideas. Sometimes the best deterrent is education and a front-loaded system.

Mr. Kang: You're only open to ideas, or are you already working on something?

Mr. Bhullar: If I tell you everything, what are you going to ask me in question period? No. We are open to ideas.

Mr. Kang: This is a question period, too. You answer my question today, and then tomorrow we worry about some other questions.

Mr. Bhullar: I'm open to ideas. I've considered what you're asking me, and to be quite honest, I haven't been swayed in either direction yet. At present all I can say is that I'm open to that idea, but I want to look at it further.

It does provide for a whole series of other sanctions. I mean, you can revoke authorization for a professional regulatory organization to comply with a personal information code. There have been examples where . . .

Mr. Kang: There are always ways to get around those things.

Mr. Bhullar: No, there is not. I'll give you an example. I'm not going to name the company's name, but there was a company that was involved some years ago with using information that people felt was not appropriate. That company to date has not received the same permissions and access to that information, and this has been many, many years now. So there are other ways of punishing other than just monetary sanctions, many other ways. You're talking about one area, and I'm open to discussing that as part of a whole host of other issues that we're looking at.

Mr. Kang: Okay. Moving on to homeowner protection. Service Alberta is responsible for consumer protection and overseeing home inspections for resale properties, both of which come under the Fair Trading Act. The ministry is also responsible for the Condominium Property Act. Media reports have suggested that it may soon handle matters pertaining to mandatory new home warranty coverage as well. The home warranty program is completing a new program that will be established by the legislation from this point.

Home inspection and business regulations, which former Service Alberta Minister Heather Klimchuk announced on May 12, 2011, came into force in September, and that was a positive development. Pertaining specifically to home inspections for resale property, the regulations require all home inspection and business and regional inspectors to be licensed by the provincial government. Alberta Liberals, while supportive of these measures, would like to see Municipal Affairs Minister Doug Griffiths follow suit on requiring all builders and contracting developers to be licensed. Additionally, we would like matters pertaining to residential construction brought under the purview of a single ministry instead of this disjointed system because Service Alberta may soon handle matters pertaining to the managing of new home warranty coverage as part of its consumer protection mandate.

Okay. How is it that the only reference to the home warranty program in Budget 2012 is a \$1.4 million line item under Municipal Affairs? Can the minister advise if Service Alberta is going to have a role in administering the province's new home warranty program, and if it isn't, why not? Why is that not reflected in the budget?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, hon. member, the Minister of Municipal Affairs is the one that deals with the building code envelope and enforcement on that side, so this new home warranty piece is something that will come through his department. As you've referenced, what we do is we license home inspectors. That's something new that was brought forth last year.

Mr. Kang: Okay. The home inspection business regulation, which came into force September 1, 2011, requires all home inspection businesses and regional inspectors for resale property to be licensed by the provincial government. How much does it cost to obtain a licence, and what sort of revenue has that generated for the province?

Mr. Bhullar: Let me see if I know how much it costs for the licence. To be honest, I believe that a licence is good for two years, and the fee is based on the number of inspectors one has employed. The cost for a company that has up to three inspectors is \$500, four to nine inspectors is \$700, and 10 or more inspectors is \$900. They must also post a security of \$10,000 and obtain \$1 million errors and omissions insurance coverage as a condition of licensing.

Mr. Kang: A \$10,000 bond?

Mr. Bhullar: Yeah.

7:40

Mr. Kang: Do we have the number of how many home inspection and business individual inspectors have obtained licences since the new regulations have taken effect? We are talking about the effectiveness.

Mr. Bhullar: Yes. I believe that so far we have had 82 businesses licensed. The numbers may have varied a bit since this date, I hear, and at the point of this information there were about 105 or so applications that were pending on the business side. On the individual side there were about a hundred inspectors licensed with about 135 that were pending.

Mr. Kang: Okay. Mr. Minister, any idea how that compares with the number of inspectors that were operating before the regulations took effect? In other words, how many, you know, dodgy inspectors were scared off by the regulations or encouraged to find a new line of work?

Mr. Bhullar: I can endeavour to get that information for you. It may be a bit difficult because we only started the regulation last year, so we only know, really, how many people got regulated, but if we have any information about that, we'll endeavour to get that to you.

This was really, hon. member, brought about because, I mean, when people are purchasing homes, inspections are sometimes something that's required even by a mortgage company, not always but sometimes. You have a background in real estate, I believe, so you know quite a bit about this. There's a continuum of folks that were providing inspection services, you know, so we felt that there was a need to ensure that people are, in fact, legitimate, that they're authorized, that they're honest, and that they are diligent and competent in what they do.

I'm told that the number before was probably about the same as the number that were licensed now.

Mr. Kang: Thank you. Okay. If the minister is fine with requiring home inspectors to be licensed, can he comment on why the province has been so reluctant to license builders, contractors, and developers as well? I know that's ultimately up to the Minister of Municipal Affairs to decide, but it is this type of inconsistency in government policy that frustrates people to no end. At the end of the day we are still talking about homeowner protection irrespective of whether that is being overseen by Service Alberta or Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, as you said, hon. member, the building envelope is something that the Minister of Municipal Affairs is responsible for, so I won't endeavour to answer the question on his behalf. What I will say is that with the implementation of mandatory new home warranties what you will have are individuals who, let's say, build a house for themselves – so they don't use a building company; they build a house themselves – who then two years in decide to sell. With a mandatory new home warranty that house will have to be covered when they're selling it. The consumer will be covered. Even though those individuals build the home themselves – they found subcontractors to build the house, and they managed the construction, but they weren't a building company per se – the consumer that ends up purchasing the home from them will still be protected because they'll be required to have a new home warranty.

Mr. Kang: Do you believe, then, that matters pertaining to residential construction and homeowner protection should be brought under the approval of a single ministry, you know, instead of having both Service Alberta and Municipal Affairs? Do you support this? Do you think it would be a good idea?

Mr. Bhullar: I work very closely with the Minister of Municipal Affairs, and Service Alberta works closely with the Department of Municipal Affairs. They are the experts in the building envelope. They're the experts in that. They're the experts in looking after the trades. We are responsible for consumer protection. Our role is one of ensuring that the consumer is protected when dealing with business. But on the structural end, hon. member, they're the experts in that area. They deal with the entire building envelope. I think that as long as the two ministries work closely together, we can cover each other very well.

I mean, the Fair Trading Act, that we're responsible for, is often something that other policing agencies or enforcement bodies can rely on as well. Our investigators work with city police, with bylaw – you name it – and perhaps even with Revenue Canada when investigating folks for breaches. Just as our investigators work with a whole host of other enforcement agencies and

investigative bodies, our department works with Municipal Affairs to ensure that at the end of the day we do the best we can to protect consumers.

Mr. Kang: Thank you.

Coming to the question of information technology co-ordination, priority initiative 3.2 of the Municipal Affairs business plan 2012-15 – that’s the Budget 2012 ministry business plan document, page 60 – is to

strengthen the long standing provincial partnership with municipalities and local housing management bodies in housing program delivery, through capacity development initiatives, including the development of a comprehensive provincial housing information management system.

The later point is almost echoed in strategy 2 of the province’s 10-year plan to end homelessness, which is to “establish a provincial electronic information management system and provide funding for its deployment.” Given that one of Service Alberta’s key responsibilities is to work with the ministries to achieve cost savings in information technology and business processes and reduced duplication of services across the ministries, can the minister confirm if his ministry is involved in helping to develop or source an information management system that can be used by both Human Services and Municipal Affairs?

Mr. Bhullar: Hon. member, I’m not sure at the moment if we are in fact involved in that very specific IT project. But our corporate chief information officer works with all ministry . . .

The Chair: I’m sorry, Minister. The time has expired for the Official Opposition.

The chair will note that since we had the introduction of members at the table, we’ve been joined by Mrs. Forsyth and Ms Notley.

I’m assuming, Mrs. Forsyth, that you will be representing the third party. The same rules will apply in your case. You have a total of 20 minutes. You can use 10 minutes all at once and then leave the last 10 minutes for the minister, or you can do as Mr. Kang did and engage in a to-and-fro.

7:50

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I think what I’ll do is ask questions and see if the minister can respond. I’m going to try and keep my questions short, and maybe he can keep his answers short.

Minister, one of the things that I think is important is to go back to the meeting of last year – you know, we had a minister here, and I happened to be here – and see the kind of progress on what the minister had said were priorities for the Ministry of Service Alberta in 2011 versus how you’re doing in 2012. I’m just going to start with that if I may.

One of the things that was asked about was the Condominium Property Act and the consultation. At that time Mrs. Klimchuk had indicated that they had a working committee, and they had been working for about a year and a half to change that act. So I go to your goals and measures, obviously, under 2.1 and it says, “Modernize the Condominium Act to enhance consumer protection and support development of a vibrant condominium industry in Alberta.” You’ve had the consultation, a very in-depth consultation, and now under your goals you’re modernizing. When is that act coming?

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, hon. member, for the question. As you’re well aware, the minister had a group of experts, a cross-section of individuals, work on one leg of this project. I actually

want to consult with everyday owners, and I am under the impression that we could have upwards of 8,000 to 10,000 submissions on this. At present I’m trying to compose a plan to be able to effectively consult with those individuals or let them get their opinions out there before we bring forward changes to this particular piece.

It’s really important that we have opinions from owners, developers, realtors, lawyers, and condo organizations, but the sheer volume of individual everyday Albertans that want to provide input on this tells me that we really need to find a mechanism to consult – I’ll use the word – before I bring forward changes.

Mrs. Forsyth: In *Hansard* Minister Klimchuk talked about the fact that it was important for Albertans to be a part of that. Are you saying now that they weren’t part of that process in that year and a half consultation and that you’re just now including Albertans? I guess I’m confused when I read in *Hansard* what she’s saying and then what you’re saying.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, hon. member, I don’t have the liberty of knowing what she said at that point. What has taken place is that an expert group has come together and came together under the previous minister, and they really narrowed down the areas that needed to be looked at and the areas that required, perhaps, the most attention. From there, what I want to do is that I want to take their work – and that committee did have everyday condo owners on it as well – further and go into the general population and ask for input.

Mrs. Forsyth: I’m going to move on if I may. We talked, and I asked the question in the last meeting that we had a year ago here about the standardization to enhance the delivery of cellphones, smart phones, and other mobile communication services across the government. I notice that’s another one of your goals. What progress has been made from 2011 to 2012 on that?

Mr. Bhullar: Can I just say one last thing on your previous question? That committee is putting together essentially a working document that we’ll actually, tangibly take out and ask Albertans for their input on.

Mrs. Forsyth: May I respond to that?

The Chair: The time is yours.

Mrs. Forsyth: Sorry. I guess where I’m getting confused is that, you know, a year ago we were here, and it was a year-and-a-half consultation process. So we’ve got another year. I’m not sure if I’m confused or if you’re confused, and I’ll be the first to admit if I’m confused. I just don’t understand why we have to have a two-and-a-half-year consultation period on a condominium act.

Mr. Bhullar: It’s a very complex piece of legislation. I’m not going to say, you know, that it should have taken two and a half years or it shouldn’t have taken two and a half years. I’m not going to argue that part. What I will say is that when I came into the ministry, I thought: this is something that, before I commence changes, I want to take – we’ll call it a draft for the lack of a better word – a draft of what this will look like to the public.

Mrs. Forsyth: If I may, Minister, just to ask: when do you anticipate bringing the condominium act into the Legislature, then?

Mr. Bhullar: Hon. member, I would hope this year.

Mrs. Forsyth: Okay. I know that probably Ms Notley is going to be following up with questions like that.

I'd like to ask you about the process on the standardization of the enhancement of cellphones and all of the other government things because, again, it's another thing that was in *Hansard*.

Mr. Bhullar: Sure. Since last year, hon. member – I spoke about this in my opening comments – what's happened is that the government actually held an RFP on wireless, and we have obtained a new contract that, when fully implemented, will save \$6 million to \$8 million. So that work has begun.

We have other phases now, other areas that we are working on, everything from, you know, shared print services to the use of actual land lines. Forgive me; sometimes I lose my technical jargon. On the example of shared print services we're looking at how we can perhaps change some behaviours within government that will save us a lot of money with respect to hardware costs and the actual cost of usage over a period of time. That's an example of something else that we'll commence work on.

Mrs. Forsyth: Okay. The update on the standardization and enhancement of the cellphones, smart phones, and other mobile communications: where are we on that? If you talk about print, I can understand print, but that was one of the priorities. Again, you've got it in 3.1 of your business plan, to enhance delivery of cell phone, smart phone, and other mobile communication services across the government of Alberta. We spoke about it a year ago, and now we're in 2012. What changes have been made?

Mr. Bhullar: We're aiming to standardize, as I talked about before, our IT equipment. There are two parts to this question. The first is that on the mobile side we took action, we have a new contract in place, and we're saving money. We're now starting to implement that throughout government. That's the mobile side.

With respect to other IT infrastructure, desktops and laptops and so on, we are moving to standardize all of this, but what we're not going to do is say: oh, we want to standardize, so everybody go out and buy a new laptop. In fact, what we are doing is that we're setting up standing offers where we get a specific piece of equipment for a specific number of dollars that is a very good deal. Moving forth as people need them, they will get that specific piece of equipment. What we don't want is everybody to abandon the equipment they're using today just to pick up that new piece of equipment because we want to standardize. So the implementation of some of this from the point when we actually sign the contract can take a period of six months, a year, or two years.

Mrs. Forsyth: Okay. If we talk about how we're moving forward, the P card that you referred to earlier was \$70 last year, and I think you said it was \$70 this year. Why hasn't there been any progress made, or did I hear you wrong?

Mr. Bhullar: No. Member, what I spoke about was that it costs us \$70 to process an invoice. Right? The more we use our P card, the less we're going to spend that \$70. We are moving forth and using our P cards a lot more. I mean, we would say that we made – what? – an 8 or 10 per cent increase in that in the course of one year.

Mrs. Forsyth: I'm sorry I'm all over the map, but time is limited. I want to ask you about the upgrading of the vital statistics registry system to meet the requirements of the planned changes to the Vital Statistics Act. That was brought up a year ago in *Hansard*, and I want to know the progress on that.

8:00

Mr. Bhullar: The Vital Statistics Act will be coming into force on May 14 of this year. It will be proclaimed. All of the background work in creating the new forms, updating the computer systems has been under way for the last number of months, and this will be in effect as of May 14.

Mrs. Forsyth: Okay. Let's talk for a minute about a couple of things if I may, first of all the Utilities Consumer Advocate. The consumer awareness and advocacy budget was increased by 7.6 per cent, and I wonder if you can rationalize why the increase in the budget for that.

Mr. Bhullar: A large portion of our budget increase is actually labour agreements. The vast majority, actually, of our budget increase is labour agreements. The only other piece, really, where we have an increase in budget is to account for more usage in SuperNet.

Mrs. Forsyth: If I may, Minister, if you go to your budget and you look at consumer awareness and advocacy, there's a 7.6 per cent increase in that. Are you saying that that's because of labour?

Mr. Bhullar: For the consumer awareness and advocacy piece? Pardon me one second while I get to the right page.

Mrs. Forsyth: And then you can go right under that, to the Utilities Consumer Advocate. I could maybe understand that being an increase in your budget with staff, but I'm wondering why consumer awareness and advocacy would have a staff impact.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, let me first say that our increase in budget over last year is labour agreements.

Now, with respect to the Utilities Consumer Advocate, the advocate is funded by industry.

Mrs. Forsyth: Yes. I know that.

Mr. Bhullar: The advocate is funded by industry, and there are some changes and initiatives that the Utilities Consumer Advocate is working on, some projects that they're working on, and thereby they do have an increase in their budget of about a million dollars.

Mrs. Forsyth: Okay. Just so I understand this, the consumer awareness and advocacy budget has been increased. Are you saying that that line item has increased because of an increase in staff?

Mr. Bhullar: This is not an increase in staff; this is an increase in the contractual agreement with the workforce. It's the 4 per cent increase for all employees through the AUPE agreement and 3 per cent for management employees and a 4.5 per cent in-range adjustment.

Mrs. Forsyth: Does that also include the deputy minister's office and corporate services?

Mr. Bhullar: Everybody. The increase in my budget overall for everything is attributed, essentially, to two things. Number one, with this increase that I just spoke about – the labour costs, AUPE – we have no change in our full-time equivalents. That's staying constant. That's staying the same as it is.

Mrs. Forsyth: Okay. We talked about – and the member next to me talked about it – that the Auditor General has found Service Alberta to be a weak protector of private information. It's been

kind of a consistency over the last few years. What are you doing to improve your protection of privacy?

Mr. Bhullar: When you're asking that question, are you referring to privacy within government, or are you referring to PIPA, the Personal Information Protection Act?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, for example, there has been some criticism under the Auditor General in regard to mortgage fraud, property fraud, some of that, where he talked about the development of a proactive data analysis for identifying potential mortgage fraud. I realize that's kind of – I don't want to use the words "tripartite agreement." It's not just Service Alberta's problem.

You also suffered from Alberta health care fraud, with no pictures on health care cards. The Auditor General talks about some of the stuff and his concern.

Privacy information: you've had some problems in the past with your registries. I know that some of the staff went in there to train the registry staff.

All of those, I think, are some of the things that the AG is concerned about.

Mr. Bhullar: Let me first start with mortgage or title fraud, which you mentioned. In that investigation they realized that it wasn't, in fact, title fraud; it was mortgage fraud. Mortgage fraud is beyond the purview of us in our department. The Auditor General's department looked at those cases and said: "Okay. This is not a case of title fraud. These are cases of mortgage fraud." Mortgage fraud is not within our scope here.

With respect to some of the other privacy concerns that you've mentioned, for example in the Auditor General's report of October 2010, we've implemented strengthening the control over granting user access to motor vehicle systems. We've implemented that. We've made the changes to the MOVES system that the Auditor General has asked us to make.

There are several other ones, like a central security office that they've asked us to create, and work is nearly done on that. There's a review and improvement of our government's shared computing infrastructure policies and procedures and standards. Again, work is almost done on that. When I say that work is almost done, I mean that we're almost at the point where we're going to ask the Auditor's office to come in and review everything we've done.

With respect to environmental security and physical security, another one of the Auditor's previous recommendations, work is almost completed on those as well, so we'll be in a position to ask the Auditor's office to come in fairly shortly to review our progress on that as well.

Mrs. Forsyth: Minister, one of the criticisms from the Auditor General was the infractions in regard to contracts. I know you've been diligently trying to deal with the contracts. He pointed out three incidents of minor infractions, but he also pointed out the fact of a major infraction during the year. I'm wondering where you are on that and how you are going to make sure that that doesn't happen again. As small as it seems, we have contracts that you're responsible for, and the AG has pointed that out.

Mr. Bhullar: We've worked with the Auditor's office on that. We've changed the process. Every contract is reviewed by our executive team now, and we've implemented the changes that the Auditor General's office was seeking.

Mrs. Forsyth: He did point out, though, that that was missed with the major contract. I'm just wondering if you've kind of closed

those loopholes and things like that to make sure that doesn't happen again.

8:10

Mr. Bhullar: Yeah, and it was actually our system that found those issues. It wasn't the Auditor that found them; it was our internal system that found those issues.

Mrs. Forsyth: Time is up.

The Chair: Thank you. Yes. You're correct, hon. member. The time is up.

We have now consumed a little over an hour and a half of our total three-hour allocation. Everyone has been sitting here for an hour and a half. The chair and perhaps the minister, I think, might want to have a bit of a stretch and a relief break, but I caution members that the clock continues to run. I am going to at the discretion of the chair call a five-minute recess, but I really do ask that you honour the five minutes, and we will start again in exactly five minutes. We'll set the timer here. So we'll have a bit of a break.

[The committee adjourned from 8:11 p.m. to 8:16 p.m.]

The Chair: All right. I will call the committee back to order.

We now move on to the fourth party, represented by Ms Notley. Once again, Ms Notley, you have the discretion of using 10 minutes consecutively or engaging in a to-and-fro. I just need to know which you want to do.

Ms Notley: I'll do the to-and-fro. It seems to have worked fairly well for the previous questioners, so it should work here, I think, as well. I guess I'm starting now. Is that the deal?

The Chair: The time is yours, 20 minutes.

Ms Notley: Okay. Well, first of all, congratulations to the minister. I think this is your first time as a minister in this setting. So there you go. Congratulations to you, I understand, also on your recent wedding, which I just heard about. Congratulations on that as well.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you very much.

Ms Notley: I've not ever done estimates for this ministry before, so I want to just start with a quick observation that in terms of preparing for it, I noted – well, the first thing, of course, that you do is go to the estimates and look at what's up and what's down, and I see that it's about a \$700,000 increase in corporate services.

Then I went to look at your annual report. I don't know who's in charge of writing this annual report, but it truly is not anywhere close to one of the most comprehensive, thoughtful, illustrative, or otherwise well-constructed annual reports that I've seen across ministries in that the description of the job of the ministry and the description of your programs and sort of the accountability measures with respect to your programs are thin and uninformative to the taxpayer at the very least. So I would hope that that increase in corporate services – actually, I guess it's more like a million dollars from the budget, but about \$700,000 from the forecast – will be dedicated at least in part to improving the way you explain to taxpayers what it is you do for the roughly \$314 million that is dedicated to your ministry.

Having said that, I'm going to go through some of the key areas that I'm interested in and ask you a lot of detailed questions based on the kind of information that I'm used to being able to find on these sorts of programs in other ministries' annual reports and hope that you'll be able to provide that kind of information to me

before we get to the vote because obviously we need to know about how things are functioning before we approve the money that you're asking for. Of course, this is, I guess, just a page out of your Premier's own bible in terms of going back and figuring out what's going on. I actually don't believe that; nonetheless, that was kind of facetious.

The first thing I want to talk about – there have been a couple of questions tonight around privacy and the protection of private-sector information. But the other thing that your ministry plays the lead on is access to information, which, of course, is one of those things that does tend to get missed when people talk about the work of that officer of the Legislature.

As I'm sure you're aware, the outgoing Privacy Commissioner made some fairly broad public observations about this government's success at making information accessible to its citizens. One of his recommendations, of course, was that there seems to be a tremendous loss of knowledge and expertise residing in the privacy branch of Service Alberta and that, in fact, that needs to be much more robust and then do a much better job of co-ordinating with other ministries in terms of improving the record of the government on its information and disclosure of information to citizens. So I'm wondering if you can tell me exactly where the FOIP work resides and what the budget amount is for this year and how that compares to what it was last year.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, hon. member, the work obviously resides within our area of consumer awareness and advocacy. The budget in that area is increasing from . . .

Ms Notley: I can see that. I'm looking for the amount that's dedicated to the freedom of information tasks, the work of being a government lead on freedom of information compliance, FOIP compliance, and that stuff.

Mr. Bhullar: I can endeavour to get you that, but I think it may be a bit difficult.

Ms Notley: That's really a critical piece of what your ministry does.

Mr. Bhullar: It is a critical piece. I don't need to be told it's a critical piece. I'm very well informed that it's a critical piece. What we do is that we assign manpower to it. I will as best as possible provide you with the number of folks that work in this area and will try to convert that into a dollar value as well for you.

Ms Notley: That would be great. And if you could do a comparison to last year for us, given that in the intervening period we've had this, I would think, notable observation by an officer of the Legislature about the functioning of this part of your ministry, that would be helpful.

One of the other recommendations, then, that the outgoing Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy commissioner made was with respect to – again, I'm talking about FOIP – the issue of instituting open data systems in the government of Alberta, open data being basically a principle, I'm sure you know, that would ensure that all information which is not sensitive is electronically available online.

The model that the commissioner used was that which was demonstrated by the city of Edmonton, which is well ahead of the provincial government in terms of making accessible the politically sensitive but nonprivate, shall we say, actions of government. So I'm wondering if there has been any consideration of that recommendation and whether there is any money in this

budget that is dedicated to perhaps turning your mind to that process and administering that kind of process going forward in the next year?

Mr. Bhullar: Thanks, hon. member, for that question. The concept of open data, open government, is something that, quite frankly, myself and our Premier are quite excited about. We have some opportunities in this specific area, and we are exploring them. The key is providing information and providing it in a usable format. We're there, and we have folks in the department today that are exploring how we can best put this out there.

We in Service Alberta will really act as a co-ordinator of this initiative and take a corporate approach to it so that we can help co-ordinate other ministries and other departments in this as well. As I said, we've got a few things that we're exploring right now, and from there we will see how we can help other ministries do the same.

8:25

It's also a question of how we intake the information in the first place. It involves a look at how we're actually bringing in information and how we're going to release information. Converting information from one source to another source can be very intensive as well, so it does involve an analysis of the input as well. Now, it involves changes, as you would imagine, to information management and information technology systems as well. We are going to look at this within our existing budget. We have people around the team today, no new FTEs in our department, so it's folks that are working in the department today that will be executing this.

I should also say that, I mean, this isn't something that we started looking at just when the previous commissioner spoke about it. Some individuals in the department were actually looking at some of this before, I'm told. I had a wonderful discussion about this with the previous commissioner, and I think it's a very exciting place to be.

Ms Notley: Well, I think it would be an exciting place to be. Just to be clear, we're not there right now. There are considerable resources that need to be dedicated to getting us there, and I mean considerable in the context of your ministry, which is a relatively small one. To suggest that your current staff complement could do it off the side of the desk is really to probably suggest that it's not going to happen in any foreseeable period of time because moving to open data involves, as you said, a great deal of information analysis, an indexing process, all that kind of stuff, and it doesn't just happen.

I'll wait to see what your overall budgetary allocation is to FOIP, but until such time as I see the government actually announcing the dedication of resources to it, we're going to have to assume that it's not going to happen. That's unfortunate. I think that if the city of Edmonton can do it, that's something that your ministry should be promoting and leading, but you can't do it off the side of someone's desk, because, as you rightly say, it's a big task.

I want to bounce over to the issue of the Utilities Consumer Advocate. There have been some questions about that. This goes back to my originating comment about the lack of information. I was very surprised – you know, last night I was at the Justice ministry estimates and was looking at the annual report of the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal. That tribunal receives less money than the Utilities Consumer Advocate, and that tribunal was able to prepare an annual report which identified the number of complaints it

received, the nature of the complaints. It broke it down by type of complaint; it broke it down into categories of resolution, where they resolved in favour, dismissed, all that kind of stuff.

So I looked for some kind of similar document for the Utilities Consumer Advocate because, of course, they have a budget that's, you know, 80 per cent higher, and I found nothing. Then I looked in your annual report and found these very unfortunate performance measures that talked about satisfaction as measured by a very limited number of people having a very inappropriate phone survey where they were not asked questions about whether their issue was actually resolved. Your performance measures for the Utilities Consumer Advocate are very problematic, and I would suggest to you that it would be wise to come back next year, if you are happy enough to come back in this role, with a very significantly revised set of performance standards and measures for the Utilities Consumer Advocate.

In the absence of those in your own documents, I'm wondering if you are able to give us the following piece of information. Can you tell us the number of calls they got last year versus this year? Can you tell us the number of investigations that occurred last year versus this year? Can you tell us the nature of advice that was sought and break those down into categories, again last year versus this year? It may sound like I'm being ridiculously demanding, but the children's advocate would provide this information, the Human Rights Commission would provide this information, and it really is quite shocking the lack of information around the functioning of the Utilities Consumer Advocate.

So I'll ask you now if you can give me that information. If you can, that's fabulous. If you can't, I'll accept a commitment to provide us with that information before we are asked to vote on this budget.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you for that question, and also thank you for the comment if I should be in this position if I'm happy. I guess you're assuming I'll be re-elected.

Ms Notley: Well, of course, I'm assuming you'd be happy to be re-elected and happy to be in this position. That's my point. If you have the good luck and good fortune to be in both instances.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you for your optimism on my success in the beautiful riding of Calgary-Greenway.

I've got some numbers here, hon. member, and I can endeavour to get you more. Why don't I start with a summary of calls answered: in 2006-2007, 15,267; in the 2007-2008 year it was 32,824; 2008-2009, 38,137; 2009-2010, 46,203; 2010-2011, 42,907.

I've got some percentages on the types of calls that were generated.

Ms Notley: This is last year, the 42,000?

Mr. Bhullar: Yeah.

About 73 per cent of calls were related to contracts; 14 per cent electricity; 13 per cent natural gas. That's some of the information.

Ms Notley: Sorry. That's doesn't add up – oh, sorry, it does. Never mind. Carry on.

Mr. Bhullar: For us lawyer types math is not always – except when it comes to billing. We seem to do well then.

I've got some further data here that talks about specific types of issues that people call in with, should that be of interest to you.

Ms Notley: Uh-huh.

Mr. Bhullar: Bill disputes: last year we received 133; this year it was 72. Contract help: 391 year previous and then 189. Licensed firms: 714 before, now 536. Metering has stayed consistent at four. Poor customer service went from four down to three. Misrepresentations: 112 down to 23. That was combined electricity and natural gas calls.

If you would like further breakdowns, I can continue.

Ms Notley: I would, actually. It will be in the record, which is great.

I'm just curious. You said 73 per cent were contract-based. Were these electricity contracts? You said 73 per cent were contract-based, 14 per cent electricity, 13 per cent natural gas. What were the contracts in relation to?

Mr. Bhullar: Those are usually issues around contracts that people have signed or just questions about possibly getting into a contract.

Ms Notley: With electricity, primarily, right?

Mr. Bhullar: That could be with any of them.

Ms Notley: Okay. Obviously, the numbers you're giving us are very interesting, but they don't come anywhere close to the 42,000. So I'm wondering if you could sort of produce a summary of what those 42,000 calls are and then provide that. I mean, some of the detailed information you've given is very helpful – thank you – but I'm just trying to see an overall picture. This is the kind of thing that would be helped by having an annual report or expanding significantly your own annual report in terms of the work of the advocate.

8:35

Mr. Bhullar: I will endeavour to get you those numbers. Quite frankly, we are having the dialogue on how we can create further awareness of the types of things that people can expect help for as well as reporting mechanisms.

Ms Notley: Well, according to your Minister of Energy people can now expect the consumer advocate to give them advice on the best deal that day. I think they're sort of like the hedge fund adviser now, and they are supposed to be giving people advice on what's the cheapest contract. Do they do that?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, hon. member, the Minister of Energy is a learned individual, and I should not question his statements. I will say that individuals can call the advocate's office and receive information on what products certain companies may be offering and an understanding of the types of products because that's an important role – right? – for someone to actually understand what the product or what that service actually entails.

Ms Notley: Okay. Do they make recommendations? If someone calls and says, you know . . .

Mr. Bhullar: They'll provide options, hon. member. But as you would know from your previous life as a lawyer, if someone called you over the phone and said "give me legal advice," you're probably not going to do it over the phone. We don't tell people what to do. We lay out their options and explain their options to them and provide them with insight on what the various products may entail. So we let people know what they need to look for, let people know what's available but not tell people what to do.

The Chair: I'm going to have to jump in here. The time for this item of business has expired.

According to the rules we now have the next 20 minutes available to members of other opposition parties. Given that no other opposition parties are present I am going to suggest that we would begin alternating the government and opposition at this point. Ms. Notley, if you would like to get back in in 20 minutes, time would be made available to you. Does that sound fair?

Ms Notley: All right. I will do that. I'll wait. Yeah.

The Chair: Okay. Mr. Allred, you have 10 minutes or could split 20 minutes, at your discretion.

Mr. Allred: Yeah. I'll do the split. I've got a number of different questions, so we'll handle them one at a time if that's all right.

Firstly, I've got a couple of questions for clarification. When you were answering some questions from Mr. Kang, Minister Bhullar, with regard to extending the Internet into the rural areas and you made the comment with regard to density where there were fewer than four homes per square kilometre, I found that a little unusual. I wish I could ask some of my more rural colleagues, but it seems to me that that is a fairly dense population given that in original homesteading it was one quarter per homestead plus they had a pre-emption so the density was much less. Now, I know that there have been a number of subdivisions, farmsteads taken out, et cetera, but there are vast areas of Alberta where there are virtually no homes, special areas, so I find that density criteria that you're using somewhat, I would almost say, unrealistic. You say that 98 per cent of Albertans now have high-speed. Obviously, that's more in the urban areas and the more densely populated. Perhaps you could expand a little bit on that density criteria that you're using.

Mr. Bhullar: Sure. Our target is 98 per cent, hon. member. Our target is to have 98 per cent of Albertans connected to high-speed Internet or at least have the possibility for them to be connected should they want to. Not everybody wants to. The four residential homes per square kilometre: that's not really our standard; that's the industry standard. Industry, private ISPs, are saying: look, if it's any less than four, then our investment into the infrastructure to provide, let's say, wireless services is not worth it. They believe that it's not sustainable, that it's not financially profitable, and in many cases they're telling us: forget profitable, they can't even break even if it's below that.

So that means we have a vast area where traditional or conventional Internet service can't be provided. I mean, in the cities we take this for granted. We take for granted the fact that we are very wired in the cities. We have access to all sorts of services. But somebody living in rural Alberta that is five kilometres away, or, heck, even a couple of kilometres away from their neighbour and who lives in a very sparsely populated area, they have challenges.

That's why I want to look at them in a separate category because the options for providing them with Internet service are then very limited. You cannot put fibre in the ground and try to connect homes that are so far apart from each other. Even in the case of wireless it's very difficult to provide wireless coverage in those areas as well. So then you're limited in your options.

Right now a lot of folks in those sorts of conditions use satellite. They use satellite coverage for Internet. From what I'm told, you know, it's been satisfactory. It hasn't been perfect. There are apparently a lot of new developments coming online with satellite that will allow for more high-speed Internet access in those rural communities. I mean, that's imperative.

For those of us living around major urban centres, this isn't even an issue that we think about. We think it's as simple as

picking up the phone and calling one of your major Internet service providers, and they'll be there in a day and hook you up. But if you're living far away, you could be paying very significant installation costs as well.

As I said, we are working with our municipalities and our Internet service providers. If there are some areas where there are at least four homes per square kilometre but there is no service, we're asking them why. We're saying: "Why are you not there? What is the challenge in that specific area?"

That's why there is no one solution to this issue. When you're down to the last 4 per cent or 5 per cent of connecting folks to the Internet, you really have to pinpoint. It's a matter of pinpointing. It's not a matter of broad strokes.

Mr. Allred: I certainly appreciate the situation. I guess I am impressed that the industry standard is as high as it is. I understood from your earlier comments to Mr. Kang that satellite may even be an option. You're throwing that out to industry to come up with viable options.

Mr. Bhullar: Yes. You know, hon. member, satellite is an option that's available today. But the issue with satellite, from what I'm told, is that the more folks that start using satellite, the slower it gets. So what's starting to happen now is that there are some companies that are launching new satellites that will provide much quicker service and open up a lot of space for a lot more individuals throughout the province.

Mr. Allred: Okay. Thank you.

Moving on to another subject. A number of departments are working very hard to come up with some common frameworks for geographic information systems. I heard you say that you were looking at trying to standardize some information systems as well. Are you working with these departments that are trying to consolidate their GIS so that they're interchangeable? Specifically, I believe it's Sustainable Resource Development, Energy, and Municipal Affairs maybe.

8:45

Mr. Bhullar: As you've indicated, a number of departments are working in this area. SRD, I think, is perhaps a main driver in this. What we're looking to do now is to see if there's overlap and if there are some ways that we can bring them together. What we often hear is folks saying, "We need information in this way, in this format" and someone else saying, "Well, you know, we need it in this format for our objectives to be met." So what I see Service Alberta's role as is to be one to see if we can get most people to fulfill or to achieve most of their objectives and bring people to common platforms. I mean, we can't get it all, but that's something that we're now looking at.

Mr. Allred: I certainly feel that's a very important area. We've been for 30, 40 years trying to get a standard base for land information. Unfortunately, we've got a lot of silos, and it becomes very, very difficult to share the information. Really, land information: the base is common, and you've got to work together on it so that we can all use that very valuable information efficiently and economically. I appreciate any co-ordination roles that you're playing in that.

My next question is with regard to fees. Are you anticipating any new fees in 2012-13 either from your own department or through the registry services?

Mr. Bhullar: I don't plan on implementing any new fees, hon. member. I think we're providing good services to the public. The

point of the fees is cost recovery. Many fees were not increased for many, many, many years, but at this point I'm not looking at any fee increases.

Mr. Allred: And that includes fees through the registry agents?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, hon. member, if I understand what you're asking, I'm looking at a report that was done by KPMG and working with our partners to see how we can best work together to ensure that everybody wins and that at the end of the day Albertans win.

Mr. Allred: So that's in the negotiation stage. That is what you're saying, I gather.

Okay. Moving on. [A timer sounded] That's only 10 minutes. I didn't think we talked that much.

Performance measures: I'm referring to page 68 of the 2012 report here. There appear to be more performance measures in the 2012-15 Service Alberta business plan compared to the 2011-14 plan. Why is this happening? Are there some particular objectives you're trying to accomplish through these extra performance measures?

Mr. Bhullar: Performance measure 2(b) was dropped for '12-15. It measured the percentage of clients surveyed who were likely to recommend consumer field investigative services to a friend. Resources have been shifted to allow two new measures under goal 1, 1(e) and 1(f), that measured a wider citizen experience with the department.

We've reviewed the ministry's performance measures to ensure a strong suite of measures going forward. Two new measures, as I said, have been added, the call service index for health-related calls and the call service index for the 310.0000 calls.

Mr. Allred: Okay. On that point, just a supplemental there. What specifically are you trying to measure by those call centre service indexes?

Mr. Bhullar: For example, the 310.0000 number is the call centre's main phone access point for the government of Alberta to the public as a whole. As such, staff for this call centre answer questions, where possible, or direct calls appropriately regarding a wide, wide range of government of Alberta programs and services.

The service index measures Albertans' satisfaction with the knowledge, the effort, the wait time, the ease of accessing this particular call centre. As I said, this call centre is really a focal point of entry for a lot of citizens into government, and we want to make sure that it's run with the utmost courtesy, with respect, that people are dealt with quickly. I want to make sure that our folks are informed.

I mean, it's not possible to have a call centre manned by an individual that knows everything about every government program, but it is important that our call centres are manned by individuals that have an understanding of where to direct people for timely information, the right information. I can say that by the volume of folks that call this number, I think we're doing a good job, but there's always room for improvement.

Quite frankly, hon. member, we're seeing that although more and more people use the Internet to access information and find information, there's still a very important need for this. There are still a lot of people that would much rather just pick up the phone and have somebody else do the digging for them, right? So somebody else is the search engine for them. We know that that's a service we have to continue to provide, and I just want to make sure

we're providing it in a manner that's respectful and that's efficient for the individual seeking the information as well as efficient for us in the delivery of that information.

Mr. Allred: I certainly agree with you. I appreciate that you're looking at more than just numbers: the courteousness, the knowledge, the effort, the helpfulness, those sorts of things. I had something else, but I've forgotten.

Another question I wanted to ask. Does this call centre service index relate at all to the questions that Ms Notley asked with regard to some other calls, or is that completely separate from this? I think that was through the utilities advocate, and the contracts, I think, was the big one.

Mr. Bhullar: No. That's a different call centre. The advocate's office has folks that are trained on issues specific to utility issues, so that's a different call centre. This deals with other government departments. I should mention that there are call centres housed within various government departments as well that are specialized, that deal with specific information about programs within specific areas.

Mr. Allred: I certainly appreciate that a lot of people need to have an actual person to talk to because they don't know what to look up on the Internet, so I can see that that service is useful.

Mr. Bhullar: Absolutely. You know, it goes to a bigger point. There are a lot of folks that can access basic information on the Internet, but they're not quite competent with respect to being able to do detailed searches. There's no one platform that every website works from, right? Every one is different, so there are a large number of people that actually have difficulty finding information online.

8:55

Mr. Allred: Okay. Thank you.

On page 70 of the business plan registry information systems has increased, I guess, \$5 million since 2010-11 but \$2 million in the last year. I believe you indicated that that was related to the electronic registration system in land titles – was it? – or did I misunderstand or assume that?

Mr. Bhullar: Actually, the majority of these increases relate to our contractual obligations to service providers for the registry information system, so within these longer term contracts there are service elements or so on that may require additional sums over a few years. There's also a small amount related to the AUPE settlement in non-union compensation. This \$8 million is a capital expense. The capital part is listed on page 245.

Mr. Allred: Sorry. What's it listed under on page 245?

Mr. Bhullar: I think that at the beginning of your question you were asking about the capital side, from what I understand.

Mr. Allred: Well, I was asking about the electronic document submissions that you're establishing. I don't know if that's a capital cost or the consulting, I would assume.

Mr. Bhullar: That is a capital expenditure.

Mr. Allred: Where is that listed in your information?

Mr. Bhullar: It's on page 245.

Mr. Allred: Right. What is the heading?

Mr. Bhullar: The heading of that is Registry Information Systems.

Mr. Allred: Okay. I've got it. Thank you.

Mr. Bhullar: It's a part of the \$10 million.

Mr. Allred: Okay. Further to that, is there any upgrading of the SPIN system in land titles proposed in this year?

Mr. Bhullar: Our ALTA 2 system is being upgraded. We have over the course of the next five years some very significant improvements that need to be made and are being made to our registry systems overall. As I said, we're spending about \$8 million this year on this particular initiative and \$8 million for the next five years on this.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. The time has expired. I will give the floor back to Ms Notley.

Ms Notley: Thank you very much. I will take the floor. I'm going to switch gears a little bit very quickly here and then go back to some of the consumer-based stuff. I don't know when it was. It was two or three years ago, I think, when the discussion around the authority and the obligation of commissioners to perform marriage ceremonies for same-sex partners was finally completed. There was, of course, a commitment made by the government to ensure that all the documentation around that would be amended to reflect that reality of Alberta's families.

About a year and a half ago or so – and I'm guessing – there was a bit of a brouhaha when it became clear that notwithstanding those assurances registries was still using dated documentation that referred to husbands and wives. They had not updated their documentation to account for the fact that we had same-sex couples getting married in this province.

Two weeks ago I had the extreme honour of being able to marry two friends of mine who are a same-sex couple on their anniversary of being together for 25 years. I was quite disappointed to discover when the documentation was sent to me by registries that it still referred to husband and wife throughout it and that it was still using the traditional language and had not been updated as the Legislature, in fact, had been assured by the previous minister would happen some time ago. So I'm wondering if you or your staff can comment on why that is the case and if we will ever see the documentation coming out of this government acknowledge the human rights of a significant portion of Alberta's families.

Mr. Bhullar: How does May 14 of this year sound?

Ms Notley: Well, it certainly sounds better than it not being done at all, but it's not an improvement on last year, when it was going to be done. Are you saying it's May 14, or are you just throwing that out?

Mr. Bhullar: I'm saying it's May 14 of this year. Look. There needed to be changes in information systems, you know, the input piece of how you're gathering information and how it's processed in the registries. That work is nearly completed. Then we needed to produce new forms and the like, like the form that you would have seen yourself. That work is under way and should be completed, I think, probably within a month or two. So that will be done in a month or two, and May 14 of this year it will all take effect.

Ms Notley: I have to say that for a government that can find a way to kick \$1.6 billion out the door to the oil and gas subsidies, half of which aren't even in the budget, with about three months' notice, I

find it quite amazing that we're talking about three and a half years to get a few forms changed.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, the first part of your comment: I don't know how it relates to my departmental budget for Service Alberta.

Ms Notley: It relates to priorities.

Mr. Bhullar: I can say that I've been Minister of Service Alberta since October and not for three or four years. I can only comment on my time here.

I understand your commitment to human rights, and I appreciate your commitment to human rights. I also understand that sometimes when people do something good, it's important to say: well done. So May 14 of 2012. We don't always need to take each other down. It's happening.

Ms Notley: Well, I'm pleased that it's happening. I just feel bad for the couples who have had to wait three and a half years for that.

Okay. We'll go back to the other issue. I want to talk about the other work under consumer protection, so consumer awareness and advocacy. Essentially, I have the same kinds of questions for this department that I had for the Utilities Consumer Advocate. I note that last year my colleague from our caucus, the leader, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood . . .

Mr. Bhullar: Which colleague?

Ms Notley: I can't remember. His name is right on the tip of my tongue, you know.

Anyway, the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood was asking about residential tenancy work, and at that time the minister had provided information that that portion of, I assume, line item 6 that was dedicated to residential tenancies had gone up to about \$2.5 million. He had asked for more information about it. But what I'm looking for this year is: what is the current financial allocation to residential tenancies, and what are the numbers around the complaints that were filed and the disputes resolved and the nature of the resolution? Again, the same kind of thing that I've asked for some of the other services that are provided through your ministry.

9:05

Mr. Bhullar: Sure. It falls under line item 6. The overall budget for line item 6 is \$20,203,000.

Ms Notley: But I'm just, again, looking for the breakdown.

Mr. Bhullar: I will endeavour to provide you with the specific breakdown for that item. The residential tenancy dispute resolution service, although it's something that my department funds, I think is something that saves a lot of other departments a lot of money, for example Justice. I think this is a service that helps keep a lot of folks away from the courts. There's a small fee for this.

I thought I had some information here with respect to some numbers on this. If you give me half a second, let me see if I do. I thought I saw something awhile ago, but if I don't, I would be more than happy to provide that to you as well. You know what? I don't think I have those here with me, so I don't want to spend your time.

I can say that since 2006 – these are some other numbers, not the numbers I was looking for – 25,000-plus applications have been received. You know, again, that's a very significant number of files that are kept away from the courts. It provides people a more informal way of finding settlement.

Ms Notley: True. What I'm looking for, though, is something, again, going back to how you folks structure your reporting for next time around, the comparison year over year: the number of complaints coming in, the nature of the complaints, the percentage of resolution, that kind of thing, the nature of the resolution. That is the kind of thing you would see, for instance, with similar bodies. Do you have something?

Mr. Bhullar: I have found some of them. For 2011 these are some of the calls, actually, that were received in relation to housing-related issues. Over 12,000 calls were just what we call general advice. Over 1,400 calls were with respect to rent increases, almost 10,000 calls with respect to security deposits, over 8,000 calls on repairs and condition of buildings, 3,400 calls on entry and lockout issues, and 20,000 calls on evictions.

Ms Notley: Those are calls looking for advice. I'm just curious about sort of the ability to – because advice is great; don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to negate it. But, obviously, the ones that you're keeping out of the courts are the ones where you actually engage in a dispute resolution process.

Mr. Bhullar: Sure. And we'll provide that to you.

Ms Notley: Thank you.

Mr. Bhullar: This is something that I think for the most part is quite successful in keeping the disputes outside of the courts.

Ms Notley: For sure. That's why I'm looking for information about it.

The next question I had was that in the last round of estimates there was talk – and it's also, of course, in your current set of goals – about modernizing the Fair Trading Act. I know there were questions around the Condominium Property Act. I'm not sure if previous people had asked about where things are at with the update of the Fair Trading Act. How long has that been going on, and what are the processes and the timelines that are associated with moving on with that?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, the Fair Trading Act is a very important piece of legislation, as you are well aware. I hope that within this year we will see amendments to the Fair Trading Act brought forth before the Legislature. There are a few areas that I think are very important. I mean, we deal with a wide range of issues under the Fair Trading Act. As you know, it applies to all consumer transactions. We've had some good success with it, but I think the time is right for us to move forth and take the next step. There are some good penalties for violating the act. I mean, you can even have a jail term, a maximum fine of a hundred thousand dollars, but . . .

Ms Notley: Sorry. I'm just a little worried about the bell going off, and I don't want to have to stick around. Could you provide me with the number of prosecutions and the penalties that have been applied in the last year under the act?

Mr. Bhullar: Yeah. Sure.

Ms Notley: Now please do carry on. I am interested in hearing what you have to say. I was just a little worried that the bell would ring before I got to that.

Mr. Bhullar: Sure. Well, in 2011 we recovered almost a million dollars for consumers. We had resolution of 511 charges, almost 400 pending charges; 24 cases with fines and probation or jail

terms of up to two years that are taking place; total fines of \$151,000; court-ordered restitution of \$134,000 that was returned to consumers over and above the \$1 million that was obtained on behalf of consumers.

You know, as I said, there are significant penalties in this. It's vast. I mean, in addition to the general parameters around the Fair Trading Act there are specific regulations that apply to different areas like door-to-door sales, energy marketers, prepaid contractors, time-shares, travel clubs, payday lenders, and so on. Under that overarching piece of legislation there are regulations that deal with a whole series of different businesses. I think it provides us with some good protections, but I'm quite excited to move forth and to beef this up even more, if I could say that.

Ms Notley: That's great news. I'll look forward to seeing that and getting some more information. As well, if you're able to break down the nature of some of the complaints by number, that would be great, if not now, then for your next annual report.

Final question. Last year the minister was talking about putting together some recommendations around the law prohibiting utilities to be terminated in winter, cold-weather utility termination. There was a fatality inquiry that she was waiting for the results of, and then there was going to be some action. I'm wondering if you could advise as to where that's at?

Mr. Bhullar: You know, that's something that, obviously, we take really seriously. At present I believe the date is between November 1 to April 14 that utilities cannot be shut off, that a basic level must be kept on. That was as a result of the fatality inquiry that you speak of.

Now, hon. member, I've looked at some other innovative ways to see how we can work on this file as well. Something that we just were working on recently was to see if perhaps we could help folks get reconnected once they are disconnected. So that's the person before November 1. We did a little pilot project on that. I'm interested to see the results come forth in the next little bit. I don't know how the results ended up playing out, but it was an innovative idea that we came up with and we're exploring. As I said, we'll wait for those results to come forth. But I think that expanding the time to now have it between November 1 and April 14 is a great step.

Ms Notley: Okay. Well, that's great.

I think that pretty much covers the questions that I have right now. You were going to be doing some updating around the settlement services, employment settlement services legislation. Can you tell me a little bit about where that's at?

Mr. Bhullar: That, too, is something that I propose to move forth sometime in the not-so-distant future.

Ms Notley: You know, the minister last year said the same thing in response to the question.

9:15

Mr. Bhullar: That's new to me. What I can say is that since becoming minister, I have reviewed these files, sought more information where I felt it was needed. There were some areas where, you know, I really thought we needed more information and where some changes to previous approaches needed to be made. We're getting close to having those made, and these are files that I, personally, think are very, very important.

I've dealt with many, many families from Calgary in my own constituency that have suffered. One particular individual – it hasn't been very long – came to my office who ended up losing

\$8,000 to \$9,000 to somebody involved in a, quote, unquote, employment/immigration agency. These are files that I'm committed to and that I hope we'll be able to move forth on in very short order, all of them within this year but, hopefully, some sooner.

Ms Notley: All right, then. Well, I will give the floor back to the chair to hand over to other interested questioners. Thank you very much for your information tonight.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have a little less than 15 minutes left. I understand there are at least two other members who have expressed interest in asking questions. If I could ask for your co-operation, you don't have to use the entire 20 minutes, and it would be helpful to your colleagues if you didn't because I have to cut the meeting off at 9:30.

Mr. Drysdale.

Mr. Drysdale: Okay. I'll try and shorten it up.

This question was partly answered already, but maybe you could go into more detail. It's to do with your priority initiative 2.3 on page 68 of the business plan, referencing legislative changes regarding employment agencies and settlement services. The wording there: "Implement legislative changes for Employment Agencies and Settlement Services to protect Albertans from predatory practices by irresponsible businesses." What's driving this regulation review?

Mr. Bhullar: Well, hon. member, there are a whole series of reasons why this is important. As you know, we're fortunate in Alberta to be a jurisdiction that has a world-leading economy, with great interest in folks to live and migrate here, and unfortunately sometimes there are some shady businesspeople that take advantage of those vulnerable people. We've heard hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of complaints, so we need to step up and send a message to folks that want to take advantage of vulnerable people that it won't be accepted.

Thank you very much for that excellent question.

Mr. Drysdale: That's it for me.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sandhu.

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you. Mr. Bhullar, I know you have been working hard for the last four months taking over Service Alberta. I've got a question about goal 2.2, the Fair Trading Act. I'm wondering. You know, some of those lien acts are about 30 years old. When are you going to review that act? It's got to be fair for the businesspeople and labour.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you for the question.

Mr. Chair, I don't know if that question deals with my business plan or my budget estimates. If you so want, I shall proceed.

Mr. Sandhu: If you're going to add money onto the budget, we need to get this resolved.

Mr. Bhullar: The hon. member is very passionate about the Builders' Lien Act, and I told the hon. member I would be happy to facilitate discussions between members of the industry that the member hears from and folks from my department to see exactly how the issues can be resolved. It's important for us to make sure that people are protected, but in making sure that people are protected, we want to make sure that we're not hindering business either. It's a balancing act, and we're open to ideas on this file.

Actually, I've just been reminded that there's a meeting taking place very soon, this week. I would say congratulations to all that have been lobbying for a meeting to take place because it's taking place this week, and we can move forward from there.

Mr. Sandhu: Well, I just want to make sure that after the meeting action is taken, that it's not just lip talk and over with after 10 minutes of discussion. I need action.

Mr. Bhullar: Well, sir, you wanted action, and we've got the meeting taking place. Come forth with ideas. I mean, it's easy for folks to come and criticize specific pieces of legislation or regulation, but what we need are ideas to ensure that we can maintain protections where we need them but not hinder businesses. We need to maintain that balance, and if you can help us ensure that we can maintain that balance, we're open to ideas and suggestions.

Mr. Sandhu: Alberta has changed in the last 30 years. When the act was introduced, it was okay and good, but now we need to review it.

Thank you.

The Chair: I don't want to interfere in the discussion, but I am supposed to keep the discussion relevant. While I understand that you can discuss things that are not in the business plan in some context, I think that perhaps we've gone a little bit beyond the scope of this committee in this line of questioning.

Mr. Sandhu: I don't know, Chair. If you ask a question in the House: no; don't ask this. If you ask in the budget time: no; don't ask. So when do we have time as private members to ask these questions? If they need money, add the money to the budget.

The Chair: Well, I've already expressed the concerns of the chair on this line of questioning.

Are there any other members who wish to participate?

All right. Seeing none, then pursuant to Standing Order 59.01(5) the estimates of the Department of Service Alberta are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule.

I remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet next on March 6, 2012, to consider the estimates of the Department of Infrastructure. We'll see you all then. Meeting adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 9:22 p.m.]

