

Title: Tuesday, March 22, 2005 Legislative Offices Committee

Date: 05/03/22

Time: 11:57 a.m.

[Mrs. Tarchuk in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I'll call this meeting to order. The meeting agenda was e-mailed to everyone last Friday, and the meeting materials are the officers' budget submissions which we reviewed last week.

I wonder if we could start with Rob and go around the table and introduce ourselves for the record.

[The following members introduced themselves: Mr. Ducharme, Mr. Griffiths, Mr. Lougheed, Mr. Magnus, Dr. Pannu, Mr. Strang, and Mrs. Tarchuk]

Mrs. Sawchuk: Karen Sawchuk, committee clerk.

The Chair: Great. Thank you.

I wonder if someone could move that the agenda be adopted as circulated.

Mr. Strang: I'll so move, Madam Chairman.

The Chair: Ivan. All those in favour? Any opposed? Motion carried.

Okay. Today we will be making decisions on the 2005-06 budget estimates for the officers of the Legislative Assembly. First, we will deal with the estimates of the office of the Chief Electoral Officer. I'll start by saying that they are looking for approval for the budget amount of \$2,497,000.

I'll just highlight some of the points that were made last week mostly with respect to any increases that were being looked at. The office had budgeted amounts for salaries looking at an increase of 4 per cent, and that was generally in keeping with the government guidelines. There was a 59 per cent increase in professional fees and development courses, et cetera, to accommodate in part the government-introduced learning and wellness account for employees. There were also some significant increases in courier and postage costs, repairs and maintenance, technology services, and materials and supplies, which are all explained in the explanation of changes to the budget. Just a reminder that the 2004-05 funds to be returned to general revenue were \$49,000.

So did someone want to go ahead and make that motion? Then we can discuss it.

Mr. Griffiths: So moved.

The Chair: Okay. Doug has moved that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2005-06 budget estimates for the office of the Chief Electoral Officer in the amount of \$2,497,000. Is there any discussion on that?

Mr. Strang: Madam Chairman, I guess just one point. As he was giving this report to us, he was stating that he doesn't have as much staff as the rest of the jurisdictions in Canada. Is he going to sort of keep more or less an updated version of the voters list so that, you know, we don't get to the crunch whenever there's an election called? I just find it frustrating from the point of view that we have to wait and, you know, we have that time lag. So it's kind of nice to know: is he going to work sort of a system out so that we have more of a continuous voters list?

The Chair: The Clerk assured me that she had this information right at her fingertips. I see that you're pointing to the explanation of changes to the budget. Just go ahead.

Mrs. Sawchuk: One of the explanations included with the CEO's budget is "increased cost post-election to clean Register of Elector data and to access new sources of elector information from public body databases. Continue to move towards geographic mapping of elector address information." In his business plan he also referred to their register of electors.

Mr. Strang: Thank you.

The Chair: Any other comments, questions?

Okay. I'll call the question on that motion. All those in favour?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay. That motion is carried.

We can move on to the office of the Auditor General. Just a reminder that they were looking for approval in the amount of \$18,690,000. Some of the highlights for increases are that they had budgeted for a salary increase of 3.49 per cent. Again, all of their increases are explained in their explanation of changes to the budget. A reminder that 2004-05 funds to be returned to general revenue were \$183,000.

Is there someone that would like to make that motion? Raj. Okay.

Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Any opposed? Okay. That motion is carried.

The office of the Ombudsman was looking to approve 2005-06 budget estimates in the amount of \$2,375,000. Some of the highlights of their presentation were budgeting for increases of 4 per cent, a 213 per cent increase in professional fees and development to accommodate in part the government-introduced learning and wellness account for employees, the payment of professional fees for legal staff and additional staff training, 92 per cent increase in travel costs, offset in part by the elimination of the Edmonton and Calgary director positions. Both of the directors retired in 2004-05, and the Edmonton Deputy Ombudsman will now frequently travel to Calgary. They also had large increases in advertising, contract services, and technology services, explained in their explanation of changes to the budget. A reminder that the 2004-05 funds to be returned to general revenue are \$232,000.

Would someone like to put a motion on the floor that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2005-06 budget estimates for the office of the Ombudsman in the amount of \$2,375,000 as presented?

Mr. Strang: So moved, Madam Chairman.

The Chair: Ivan.

Any discussion? Go ahead, Denis.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you. I still do have some concerns with the budget of the Ombudsman. One of the points is that this year 12 per cent of his total budget will be coming back because of unexpended funds. When we had the debate when we did the budget the previous year, we had raised concerns that we wanted to have some more accurate type of a budget process. Now he's asking this year for an 11 and a half per cent increase. He's giving back 12 per cent.

As I raised at that initial meeting when he was here, I had concerns with the major increase in his travel costs. He did explain

to a certain amount that, yes, it's commuting people for training back to Calgary, but it is an increase of 92 per cent compared to the previous budget.

12:05

Also, in terms of advertising I felt that the answer to it was not quite clear in terms of being able to go out and sell the role of the Ombudsman. As most MLAs know, when people reach the point that they have to go visit the Ombudsman, basically they're getting that type of advice from the MLA after all their resources have been expended.

So with that in mind, I do have concerns in terms of going with the increase of 11 and a half per cent, the fact being that they're returning 12 per cent of last year's budget, now we're adding another 11 and a half per cent this year. That adds up to some big dollars in the overall budget when you look at it, and I'm just wondering if he needs that type of money to be dished out at this time.

The Chair: Did you want to make any suggestions?

Mr. Ducharme: My suggestion, say, at least to put it more in line with the other ones at a 5 per cent increase rather than 11 and a half per cent.

Dr. Pannu: Madam Chair, would someone help me recall the argument that he made for that scale of increase? What's causing this request to go up by 11 and a half per cent? What did he have to say about it?

Mr. Ducharme: If I recall correctly, most of it had to do in regard to travel costs for the training of individuals, that he'd be from Calgary commuting back to Edmonton. Also the fact that he had hired a Deputy Ombudsman rather than having seniors. Just basically, I would think, more of a change of name rather than position and would be extra travelling to Calgary.

The other fact was building up a higher profile. He had indicated that they had made up some new pamphlets, which was going to increase the budget this year, more or less informing Albertans of the role of the Ombudsman, which is something that he had commenced in the last year also. I know that he had visited many of our constituency offices and met with our constituency assistants and, I guess, was wanting to do that with the new members that came in.

But I think there are sufficient dollars in the budget. With the fact that there's 12 per cent being returned this year, asking 11 and a half per cent is still going to be giving him, basically, if we use up the dollars that have been returned and the increase, you're still looking at 17 per cent of his total budget.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you for the help that I sought on this. As he was trying to justify this increase and responding to our questions on that day, what was going through my head were the kinds of expectations we also set for him when he came up for the interview – you remember? – during the appointment process. One of the things that was attractive about him as a candidate, among several, was his vision of where he wants to take this office.

So part of the request for an increase that he's making I think is reflective of the commitments that we sought, and he was more than willing to give us, as to how he would undertake the responsibilities of the office and engage in activities that perhaps previous Ombudsmen hadn't. But whether or not carrying out those additional activities requires an 11 per cent increase against the backdrop that

he is returning close to 11 per cent from the last year's unspent budget does raise some questions about whether or not he's asking for too much.

The Chair: Actually, Raj, if you look at the fourth point in the explanation of changes to the budget, you're right; the office here is looking at a \$95,000 increase to raise the profile of the office.

Dr. Pannu: Right.

The Chair: Okay, are there any other comments?

We have a motion on the floor. Denis, you're suggesting that – well, actually I'll let you suggest what you're thinking.

Mr. Ducharme: What I'm suggesting, Madam Chairman, is that the increase of 11 and a half per cent that the office of the Ombudsman is asking for be reduced to a 5 per cent increase for the budget year 2005-2006.

The Chair: Okay. If you can just give us a minute here, we'll come up with a figure of what it is we'd be looking at.

Ivan, would you consider that a friendly amendment to your motion?

Mr. Strang: Yes, I would.

The Chair: Okay. The new motion now can be read as Ivan moving that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2005-06 budget estimates for the office of the Ombudsman in the amount of \$2,236,500 as revised.

Is there any discussion on that motion?

Dr. Pannu: What's the dollar amount by which the request is being shaved down?

The Chair: I'm sorry?

Dr. Pannu: The difference between what was asked and what this motion now puts before us.

Mr. Ducharme: A \$138,500 reduction.

Mr. Flaherty: Madam Chair, may I just ask. Was it \$2,236,500? Is that what you said?

The Chair: That's right.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you.

The Chair: Any other comments, questions?

Dr. Pannu: I have just one concern, although I don't think it's strong enough for me to vote against the motion before us, Madam Chair. If I recall, the Ombudsman said that the caseload has increased quite considerably over the last couple of years. He has set certain standards with respect to the time within which cases must be dealt with. I hope that that part of his undertaking, you know, the times that he has given for cases to move from one state to the other, doesn't extend as a result. That would be my only concern, because 130-some thousand dollars is a fair amount. So that's the concern that it raises in my mind. I just wanted to put on record that we need to monitor that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Griffiths: Should we also note that the amount of money that he actually used last year, returning 11 per cent plus this 5 per cent increase – it's still a 17 per cent increase over what he actually used last year, not what he budgeted for but what he utilized. I just thought maybe we should have that on record as a point.

The Chair: Any other comments, questions?

All those in favour of the motion? Any opposed? Okay. Hearing none, that motion is passed.

We can move on to the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner. That office was looking for approval in the amount of \$4,336,000 as they presented. Some of the highlights of that presentation: they budgeted for salaries at 3.5 per cent, a 51 per cent increase in contract services to accommodate anticipated increased consulting fees, and a one-time payment of \$50,000 to the University of Alberta towards the information access and protection of privacy certificate program, and a reminder that the 2004-05 funds to be returned to general revenue are \$267,000.

12:15

I wonder if someone would put on the floor the motion that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2005-06 budget estimates for the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner in the amount of \$4,336,000 as presented.

Raj: Is there any discussion on that motion?

All those in favour of the motion? Are there any opposed? Okay. That motion is carried.

Now to deal with the office of the Ethics Commissioner. They are looking for \$419,000 as presented in their budget estimates. The highlights: they have budgeted a 4 per cent increase for salaries, and they have large increases and decreases in all categories as explained

under their reference link section. The 2004-05 funds to be returned to general revenue are \$74,440.

I wonder if someone could move that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2005-06 budget estimates for the office of the Ethics Commissioner in the amount of \$419,000 as presented.

Mr. Ducharme: I so move.

The Chair: Is there any discussion on that?

All those in favour of the motion? Any opposed? Okay. That motion is carried.

I'll just mention to the committee that we do have to meet probably in the next month or so to conduct the required annual review of officers' salaries. Karen will poll the members to find out what date is good for most of us.

If I could have a motion to adjourn.

Mr. Strang: Madam Chairman, before we adjourn, just one point. Richard had mentioned that if we're sitting, could we keep it away from this time frame? Being the Deputy Speaker, he always has a meeting with the Speaker, and he'd like to be here.

The Chair: Okay. We'll note that, and we'll certainly give people an opportunity to state their preferences. We'll probably look at a dinner meeting. It had a good response last week.

A motion to adjourn? Nobody wants to?

Dr. Pannu: So moved.

The Chair: All those in favour? That motion is carried. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 12:17 p.m.]

