



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature  
First Session

Standing Committee  
on  
Members' Services

Wednesday, February 4, 2009  
9:30 a.m.

Transcript No. 27-1-3

**Legislative Assembly of Alberta  
The 27th Legislature  
First Session**

**Special Standing Committee on Members' Services**

Kowalski, Hon. Kenneth R., Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock (PC), Chair  
Oberle, Frank, Peace River (PC), Deputy Chair

Elniski, Doug, Edmonton-Calder (PC)  
Hehr, Kent, Calgary-Buffalo (L)  
Leskiw, Genia, Bonnyville-Cold Lake (PC)  
Mason, Brian, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood (NDP)  
Rodney, Dave, Calgary-Lougheed (PC)  
Snelgrove, Hon. Lloyd, Vermilion-Lloydminster (PC)  
Taylor, Dave, Calgary-Currie (L)  
VanderBurg, George, Whitecourt-St. Anne (PC)  
Weadick, Greg, Lethbridge-West (PC)

**Also in Attendance**

Anderson, Rob, Airdrie-Chestermere (PC)

**Support Staff**

W.J. David McNeil	Clerk
Allison Quast	Special Assistant to the Clerk
Bev Alenius	Executive Assistant to the Chair
Louise J. Kamuchik	Clerk Assistant/Director of House Services
Brian G. Hodgson	Sergeant-at-Arms
Robert H. Reynolds, QC	Senior Parliamentary Counsel
Shannon Dean	Senior Parliamentary Counsel
Cheryl Scarlett	Director of Information Technology and Human Resource Services
Scott Ellis	Director and Senior Financial Officer, Financial Management and Administrative Services
Liz Sim	Managing Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

9:30 a.m.

Wednesday, February 4, 2009

[Mr. Kowalski in the chair]

**The Chair:** Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It's 9:30. It's February 4, 2009. Notice was sent to all members in the appropriate way for this meeting.

At the outset let me just apologize for the cancellation of the meeting which we had scheduled in the early part of December. As all members will know, the economic situation in the last quarter of 2008 seemed to be confronting everyone with a lot of questions about where we were on any given day, and it hasn't improved much. As a result of the need to try and be as definitive as possible with respect to the proposed 2009-2010 Legislative Assembly budget, I thought it prudent at the time to basically delay that meeting. We've delayed it two months, but we're now in a position, I believe, where we have to move forward. I appreciate your understanding the reason for the cancellation of that December meeting and being with us here this morning.

I've been advised by all members save one that they will be in attendance this morning. I will ask the government caucus whip if there is a replacement. I've been advised that Mr. Snelgrove cannot join us this morning. Do you know if there's a replacement for him?

**Mr. Oberle:** Not that I'm aware of, no.

**The Chair:** Okay. We do have a quorum here, and I expect that in the next minute or two some additional members will be joining us as well.

Welcome. We have an agenda with us, and I would ask for approval of the agenda. Mr. Hehr so moves. Mr. Oberle seconds. All in agreement?

**Hon. Members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Would there be additional items that individuals would like to raise for this agenda? There may be one that I'll raise, depending on the time, and it will have to do with caucus expenditure guidelines, particularly in light of the new electronic age, dealing with websites and the like. But that will be only if we have time to just raise it rather briefly, and it would come in, I guess, as 5(e). Okay. We've had the approval of the agenda, then.

Approval of the minutes of June 4, 2008, is requested. Mr. Taylor. Mr. Rodney. All agreed? Any business arising out of the minutes?

All right. Then let's move to item 4, business arising from the last meeting. The only item that we had in the minutes: Request for Additional Funds for Official Opposition Caucus. If you look at minute 08.20, I'd indicated at the last meeting that we had, on May 21, 2008 – well, suggested is what I did; that's what the minute says – that the committee members "have further discussions amongst themselves with respect to the matter of request for the additional funds for the opposition caucus." We will be coming to new business and the Legislative Assembly budget estimates in a few minutes from now. We can deal with 4(a) now, or we can put 4(a) with 5(a) if there is a request for additional funds for the opposition caucuses.

**Mr. Hehr:** Essentially, where we are with that is the same place we were six months ago. It doesn't seem that that additional request is going anywhere, so we're prepared just to make our submissions this year on trying to keep our budgets in line with what we need in our office. We have come to the recognition that there doesn't seem to

be an appetite for an increase in budgets, although we could use – in all honesty, two more researchers would go a long way to make our jobs as Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition more effective and serve democracy.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mr. Mason.

**Mr. Mason:** Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. Well, I would prefer to deal with it as part of the budget. I'll propose an amendment and see where it goes. That's probably the best way to deal with it.

**The Chair:** Would that be okay, then, if we just move on to the budget proposal and then pick it up when we come to the Official Opposition section?

**Mr. Hehr:** Sounds great.

**The Chair:** That would be fine? All right, then. Let's move forward.

New business. In the memo that I sent to you dated February 2, 2009, I'd indicated that the responsibility that we had was to present a budget to the members of the Members' Services Committee based on the decisions of the previous meetings of the Members' Services Committee. One of those decisions, of course, is the parameters by which a budget would be established by the Legislative Assembly Office. We have before us a budget based on the parameters that we've already agreed to, but since these parameters were put in place and this budget was put in place, I've also been advised by government members of the committee that they're going to be bringing forth a motion this morning that will freeze the anticipated April 1, 2009, adjustments to members', Executive Council's, and committees' remuneration.

In that memo that I sent you, I sent you some documents. First of all, if you flip over from the memo that I sent you, there was the updated average weekly earnings index. We printed this one last week. Just to show you how fluid this is, after having printed it last week on January 30, 2009, that 4.7 per cent average weekly earning index number moved to 4.9 per cent. The whole trend line for the average weekly earnings index has gone up rather than going down. In terms of the budget the numbers in the budget were based on 4.7 per cent.

You'll see other documents that basically show the comparatives across the country for elected representatives of the people.

The last little attachment there, a document, is the *Weekly Economic Review*, which is published by Alberta Finance and Enterprise and is dated January 30, 2009. You'll see on the second page of that the 4.9 per cent average weekly earnings index, and you'll also see the consumer price index at 1.9 per cent.

What we have in the budget overview are the parameters by which we have built this budget. If you don't mind, I'll just take a minute or two to go through these parameters. If you look at the red tab in your binder, you have the parameters. These are the parameters we used. Operational costs reflect a 1.96 per cent increase. That's based on the December 2008 CPI information for Alberta, the document that I just showed you, which was the source of that. Because we follow the budget of the government, and the government has contracts with its employees, we follow whatever that contract is. So put in here for human resources, with the current contract the government has with all of its unions, is a 4 per cent public service scale in-range adjustment plus a 4.3 per cent public service market adjustment. That is the base we used for the human resources components and portions of all the budgets in here.

Third, for budgeting purposes, we are using 80 sessional days. It became very clear as a result of the amendments to the standing orders and the agreements among the various caucuses last fall as to what the calendar will be for 2009 to 2010. We could extrapolate and determine that 80 would be the basis for the costing numbers there.

We had a request for Alberta to host the 2009 Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees conference. It's our turn on a rotation basis. The original review of costing for a budget for that was some \$60,000. We reviewed it in making our submission to you and reduced it to \$25,000.

Funding has been included for the five policy field committees: Community Services, Economy, Health, Public Safety and Services, and Resources and Environment. Our number in here for 2009-2010 is \$503,000 as compared to the current fiscal year one of \$496,000, a difference of \$7,000 for those committees. We have contingency funding in here for the anticipation of a select special review committee that may come about in fiscal 2009-2010. It depends entirely on certain recommendations from the Legislative Offices Committee and the continuation of certain officers. There may very well have to be recruitment, but that's subject to them determining that.

**9:40**

The second component of the budget is the MLA administration budget. I indicated that we used 4.7 per cent, which we put in this budget.

Members are entitled to an RRSP allowance. The number for 2009-2010 is \$10,500 compared to the 2008-2009 number of \$10,000.

Then the big component in here is the number of constituency offices. Each MLA is given an apportionment to run a constituency office, and there are a number of factors that go into building that budget. First of all, one parameter we have is the amount of dollars we budget for the cost of the space that an individual member has, and space varies. We received the number to show what the difference was. In 2008 there had been an inflationary increase there of 5.2 per cent for office space, and that was put into the base in building that budget. The market adjustment for the staffing side, the one we talked about earlier, the 4.3 plus the 4, was put in there. There was a slight increase in the postal rate – that was put in there – and an inflationary factor for updated population and elector numbers. As a result of those changes, the request for the constituency office allocations for the 83 members for this year is \$10,889,000 versus the current fiscal year number of \$10,022,000.

We applied the 1.9 inflationary adjustment for the temporary residence rate, currently \$185. As a result of that, it will go to \$189.

We have one other item in here that we have to deal with, and that's the insurance policy we pay to risk management and insurance, which is a division of Alberta Finance and Enterprise. They're telling us that they want a 10 per cent increase over the 2008-2009 premium. Now, this is internal, within the province of Alberta. You know, members are making a decision to do certain things; other agencies of the government are basically saying to other parts that it is 10 per cent. So overall this would arrive at a 1.9 per cent adjustment.

Then you see the tabs that go with all of this. If you were to look at the next tab, the estimates summary, those would be the numbers to show that there is no change in full-time equivalents. This is the 11th year in a row that I've presented a budget to you with no increase in staff or manpower. Eleven years in a row. I'm kind of happy about that. These are very good people who work very, very hard, and they're very, very efficient, so we work smarter. Some-

times when people come to me and say they need more manpower, I say: well, fine, we'll have the discussion. But 11 years in a row. It's 1.9 per cent overall, including the 4.7 per cent.

Should the members choose to present a motion – and I'll stop in just a second – and that motion be passed, freezing the remuneration for those three groups that I talked about, the members and the Executive Council and committees, there would be three items on that page which would be adjusted downward, three lines. The office of the Speaker would be adjusted by \$4,000 downwards, and that would become \$549,000. The second one would be legislative committees, where the current number shows \$2,842,000. I'll circulate a sheet for you in just a second. That new number would become \$2,699,033. The third one would be MLA administration, which shows \$31,099,000, and that would become \$30,787,134.

Allison, perhaps you could circulate that sheet, which would be the revised sheet. Now, I may be jumping the gun here, but just so that there's complete transparency, that would be the revised sheet should such an item come about. I have been advised by the government members that this is what they choose to do. Perhaps we might want to deal with this matter right at the start and then move forward as we go through each tab because that would be where the changes would come from.

I would then recognize the government whip, Mr. Oberle.

**Mr. Oberle:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I indeed want to table a motion. As you indicated, the Members' Services orders provide for an annual adjustment to the salaries referenced in the Executive Council salaries order, certain allowances referenced in the members' allowances order, and the allowances in the members' committee allowances order, the adjustments based on the percentage increase or decrease in the average weekly earnings for Alberta as reported by Statistics Canada for the immediately preceding calendar year. The adjustment that would apply at the time of writing this for the 2009-2010 fiscal year would be 4.7 per cent, I believe you indicated. In fact, it has been adjusted to 4.9 per cent.

Given that, at this time I would like to move that there be no annual adjustment to the salaries and allowances referenced in the Executive Council salaries order, members' allowances order, and the members' committee allowances order for the fiscal year April 1, 2009, to March 31, 2010.

**The Chair:** A seconder?

**Mr. Mason:** I'll second it.

**The Chair:** Mr. Mason. Discussion?

**Mr. Mason:** Having seconded it, I wonder if the mover could specify exactly who is covered by this, what staff. I know that it covers the MLAs, but I'd like to know who else is covered.

**Mr. Oberle:** That's all it covers: all of the members of the Executive Council and all MLAs. None of the remuneration to staff is identified in those orders.

**Mr. Mason:** Okay. Well, my confusion arises out of some media coverage that indicated that political staff might also be covered by this.

**The Chair:** There are no political staff in the Legislative Assembly Office of Alberta. There are no political staff.

**Mr. Mason:** But there are in the offices.

**The Chair:** There can't be. This is taxpayers' money. We cannot have political staff. This is the whole operation, including the caucuses. It's not political.

**Mr. Mason:** Fine. Thank you.

**The Chair:** If there is a misconception there, we should have a clarification.

**Mr. Mason:** Well, I'll have a chat, I guess, Mr. Speaker.

**The Chair:** Further discussion?

Shall I call the question? Mr. Oberle has moved, and Mr. Mason has moved, that

there will be no annual adjustments to the salaries and allowances referenced in the Executive Council salaries order, members' allowances order, and the members' committee allowances order for the fiscal year April 1, 2009, to March 31, 2010.

All in favour, please say aye or raise your hand. Opposed, please raise your hand or say no. It's carried unanimously.

Okay, then, hon. members, the sheet that was just circulated by Allison is probably the worksheet that you should put into that tab to basically show you where it was. My understanding is – and we have done some numbering for this – that with these adjustments downward and with an arrival, then, at an overall budget of \$57,882,000 that in essence this would reflect a 1.05 per cent increase over the current fiscal year's budget, 1.05 per cent.

I will now proceed to give you an overview of all of these tabs, and then we'll come back. Is that fine? Okay. The first one, then. As I indicated, we used the parameters. This was kept very, very lean. It has to do with the financial management and administrative services section. You can see the human resources numbers in there. Operational expenses decreased by \$5,000 to arrive at the number we have for that section. Nothing else to be said about it.

The Legislative Assembly human resource services one shows you the manpower adjustments based on the formula we talked about, with a \$2,000 increase for inflationary maintenance and replacement costs for the office equipment rental and purchase. That's the only thing that changes.

The third tab, the office of the Speaker. The request was for a certain number, but we just made a decision. One of the items in there was the pay to the Members of the Legislative Assembly and the Speaker's office. There's a reduction there of \$4,000 to reflect that elimination, and everything else basically held as it was.

The next tab, the Legislature Library, once again shows you the human resource component, the staffing members in there, plus some adjustments in the operational side to basically show an increase of \$21,000 to look at the increased cost of library materials. That's an area that continues to grow. There are a lot of changes in that area. It may very well be that a few years from now we'll be dealing with a lot of electronic books more than anything else, but I don't think we've arrived there yet. I think we're in that phase-in phase, so who knows where we'll end up with that one.

9:50

The next item, House services, essentially covers the administration of the Legislative Assembly. You can see the human resources component in there. This is manpower that we basically talked about. There's a \$452,000 increase in the human resources budget and a decrease of \$13,000 on the operational side, for a net increase of \$439,000. Again, formula driven, nothing added at all.

Information technology services. Again, the same parameters were used for the budget request we have for that one.

The legislative committees component has been adjusted downward as a result of the decision you just made, because there are manpower components in there. The new number will kick out at \$2,699,033 as compared to the previous figure, as a result of the motion that you've just given. That covers all the committees that there are: the standing committees, all of them in terms of their activities. We have a lot of committees now associated with the Legislative Assembly of Alberta and the government of Alberta, the operation of it. Members must be quite busy.

The next item is MLA administration. This deals with the categories of pay and benefits to members, former members of the Legislative Assembly, constituency office-related expenditures, and operational expenses: travel, office equipment, and the like. That one has been adjusted downward, too, as a result of the motion that you just provided there. You've had several days now to deal with all the parameters associated with it, the review of what I've talked about before. The office allocation base was increased 5.2 per cent and staffing that 4 per cent plus the 4.3 per cent, or 8.3 per cent. That doesn't mean all the staff are going to get 8.3 per cent. It's just that there is a component there for changes from one level to another and some bonuses that would be attached to that as well. But there is the number based on it.

The next tab, basically, is government members' services. Based on 47 members, the base allocation for building the caucus budget in the current fiscal year was \$66,150 per member. The 1.9 per cent adjustment raises that to \$67,407 per member. There are 47 private members in the government caucus. So 47 times \$67,407 gives us the number of \$3,168,129, plus there's support for the various committees that exist of \$770,364, so you get a total number of \$3,939,000 as compared to the current fiscal year budget of \$3,998,000.

The government budget actually has gone down. That's not because of any great prudence on behalf of the government caucus; it's the result of what happened last spring, as you'll recall. The election came late in March. Appointments were made at certain points in April, certain points in May, certain points in June. This budget was presented based on 49 caucus members, and then that was reduced, so we carried the number of the government caucus, returned the dollars to the Legislative Assembly with great prudence in that. That's the reason why it shows you a slight adjustment downward.

Tab 10 shows the Official Opposition budget again. Nine members at \$67,407 gives you \$606,663. There's the leader's office allowance, \$466,498; the Calgary caucus office allowance, \$74,724; and then committee support of \$385,182. It gives us a budget of \$1,534,000 based on that 1.9 per cent item.

Then tab 11 shows you the ND opposition services, or the third party. Two members, \$67,407, gives you \$134,814; the leader's office allowance, \$233,249; plus committee support of \$192,591 to give you a total of \$561,000.

That is where we basically are. There are no special funding requirements. That's basically the presentation, ladies and gentlemen.

Yes, Mr. Taylor.

**Mr. Taylor:** Yeah. I have one question going back to MLA administration, just in reference to the sessional, non-sessional, and extraordinary temporary residence allowance rates going up from \$185 to \$189 a day. Does that increase the capital residence allowance to \$1,890 a month, then?

**The Chair:** Yes. It'll all be consequential.

**Dr. McNeil:** Just related to that there are two orders that would follow from approving the budget. With respect to the temporary residence allowance and the members' services allowance the constituency office budgets could follow from the assumptions that were in the assumptions page.

**The Chair:** Okay. We have all these tabs. I'm wide open as to how you would want to deal with this. Do you want to go through each tab and give your approval to it, or do you just want to have a general discussion? Okay. Then we will go to number 10, the Official Opposition services one.

Mr. Hehr and Mr. Taylor, you wanted to make some comments with respect to that, if I am correct.

**Mr. Hehr:** Yeah, and we've circulated a document in that regard.

**The Chair:** We'll speak through the chair, please. Mr. Hehr or Mr. Taylor, who would like to proceed?

**Mr. Hehr:** Now, if you take a look at the document we've circulated, just to keep equal to where we were as of last year, we're requesting essentially \$10,000 on the operational side of things to cover the increase in costs of our southern Alberta caucus office as well as inflationary costs. Then our human resource budget estimate requires an increase of approximately \$98,000 in order to cover public service in-range and market adjustments and full participation in all benefit plans. The breakdown is essentially there.

If you look at why we need the increase to the SALCO office, right now in the budget it will only receive the standard 1.9 per cent increase that the other offices under the LAO have received. However, our rent is increasing by 5 per cent in that office. We had a shortfall last year of roughly \$30,000 that we covered, and the projected deficit this year is \$31,000.

I think you guys are all aware, too, that as the opposition we have some extraneous costs that are unique to the opposition that government doesn't necessarily incur. That's leader's travel, functions not equivalent to but trying to at least offer some coverage of what we are doing on new media – obviously, not equivalent to the Public Affairs Bureau, but we do our best – and coverage of the office space deficit. That's essentially what these funds are going to be used for.

This by no means is an ask for additional staffing supports, which we made last time. We believe that what we've prepared here will just keep us equal to what we have in place.

**The Chair:** Additional comments?

Mr. Hehr, would you like to move such a motion, then, requesting an increase of \$109,113?

**Mr. Hehr:** That seems brilliant. I move that the opposition budget be increased by \$109,113 over last year's approved budget.

10:00

**The Chair:** Secunder? Mr. Taylor. Discussion? Shall I call the question?

**Mr. Oberle:** I have a question. In your proposed budget, Mr. Speaker, does the southern Alberta office receive the office space adjustment that the constituency offices did?

**The Chair:** No.

**Mr. VanderBurg:** I wonder if the mover of the motion would be willing to break it into two parts: \$10,000 for the southern Alberta caucus expense and \$98,000 for the increases to your public services.

**The Chair:** He can have an amendment to the motion.

**Mr. Hehr:** If you want to amend it, go ahead.

**Mr. VanderBurg:** I move to amend the motion to split the request as provided in the memo.

**The Chair:** Okay. Secunder to the amendment? Okay. So everybody agrees.

We'll have a discussion on the amendment. The amendment is basically to say that there should be, in essence, two votes: one vote for \$98,788 and one vote for \$10,324.72. Would I be following this correctly, Mr. VanderBurg?

**Mr. VanderBurg:** Yes.

**The Chair:** All agree to that, to the splitting?

**Mr. VanderBurg:** The splitting, yes.

**The Chair:** Okay. Now we can have a discussion before we proceed. Anybody want to talk further about this?

**Mr. VanderBurg:** Well, Mr. Speaker, I understand the reasoning that the member has raised with the costs in the southern Alberta caucus office, and your comments that the increases that MLAs were given in lieu of increased rental costs and that this was not increased make me think that I can support the expenditure of \$10,324.72.

**Mr. Oberle:** I would echo that comment provided that that increase is the same percentage that the constituency offices increased. It's not clear to me if that, in fact, is the case. It's not?

**Dr. McNeil:** If I can add. Yeah, if you increase the \$73,331, which it was last year, by 5.2 per cent, that would come out to \$77,144.

**The Chair:** Okay. If I understand this correctly, we have an amendment to a motion, but it's based on numbers that we think are not the numbers that people want to support. Why don't we proceed, then, on this basis. My recommendation to the group is that you defeat the amendment, defeat the motion, and we start over again. Would that be fine? Okay.

All those in favour of the amendment as proposed by Mr. VanderBurg? Those opposed? It's defeated.

On the motion put forward by Mr. Hehr, all those in favour? All those opposed? It's defeated.

Now, Mr. Hehr, we'll go back to you. As I understand through the little discussion that we've had here, you're basically requesting a certain increase. We're not going to deal with the human resources one yet. We'll deal with the operational one first. The current budget for the Calgary caucus office, for 2008-2009, is \$73,331. The argument put forward by Mr. Hehr is that he thinks it would only be fair if that would be increased by 5.2 per cent, which is the parameter we used for the other offices. So why don't you make a motion. I'm going to make a suggestion, Mr. Hehr, that you make a motion basically saying that the Calgary caucus office, being a base of \$73,331, be increased by 5.2 per cent.

**Mr. Hehr:** That's exactly the motion that I will propose, that the southern Alberta caucus office be increased by 5.2 per cent, like the other offices have been so far.

**The Chair:** Now, do we have a seconder? Mr. Taylor?

**Mr. Taylor:** I'm not prepared to second that motion.

**The Chair:** Oh, okay.

**Mr. Taylor:** I think that if we're going to break this down and examine the southern Alberta caucus office using the same parameters as we used for constituency offices, perhaps we're still dealing with the wrong numbers. Perhaps we should be using the same parameters that we do for MLA offices, and as I look back here, that would seem to involve a 5.2 per cent increase in part and an 8.3 per cent increase in part for staffing costs as well. So with perhaps complete disregard for *Robert's Rules of Order* – and I'm sure, Mr. Chair, you will rule on that – I throw that spanner in the works.

**The Chair:** Well, look, we're going to try to be as informal as we possibly can. That's just the approach that we should be taking.

Be careful, sir – I'm getting involved now in the debate – that you do not get what you ask for. Please remember that the Calgary caucus office allocation of \$73,331 is based on two components. It's based on the manpower, and it's based on the physical cost of the thing. If the physical cost of the rent is less than \$20,000 and you're asking for a 5.2 per cent increase on that, you may find out that you're going to get less with your proposal than you're getting with this one. That's all I'm saying.

**Mr. Taylor:** Okay. Mr. Chair, having taken into consideration . . .

**The Chair:** I haven't taken into consideration anything. I'm just making a suggestion. Go ahead. Sorry; I'll go back to being quiet.

**Mr. VanderBurg:** I'll second Mr. Hehr's motion.

**The Chair:** Okay. Now discussion on the motion. We've heard Mr. Taylor. Anybody else wants to raise something on that?

Then the committee has before it a motion, moved by Mr. Hehr and seconded by Mr. VanderBurg, that

the Calgary caucus office allocation be increased 5.2 per cent above the \$73,331.

Mr. Clerk, what would that new number be?

**Dr. McNeil:** It's \$77,144.

**The Chair:** All in favour of the motion? All opposed? The motion is carried. So this budget has to be increased. That one component will see a new number in there. Allison, you'll keep track of this amazing adjustment in dollars? Okay.

Mr. Hehr, you still have another part of your presentation that you want to deal with?

**Mr. Hehr:** Yes. The rest of the presentation, or the ask, goes to staffing, the Official Opposition human resource budget. Obviously, I'll make a motion requesting that

we get that increase of \$98,788 in order to cover public service in-range and market adjustments and full participation in all benefit plans.

**The Chair:** Seconder? Mr. Taylor. Discussion?

**Mr. Oberle:** I'm curious as to which staff this applies to. For the staff that the LAO supplies through the members' services allowance, their salaries and benefits are adjusted already by way of your budget. Which staff are we talking about here?

**Mr. Hehr:** Well, that is a very good question. My assumption is that it would be for all of our people who are currently in the office. I couldn't give you an exact breakdown of what that is. If you want to give me two seconds, I can come back with that information.

**Mr. Oberle:** Well, I guess you could do that. I would assume that you're talking about all of your staff. Given a ballpark 4.7 or 4.9 per cent, you're talking about a salary budget in the neighbourhood of \$2 million. That's your entire staff, and they're already incremented. Those salaries are already counted in the LAO budget.

**Dr. McNeil:** This is your caucus staff that this budget applies to.

**Mr. Oberle:** Well, that's my question: which caucus staff? My budget arises from the members' services allowance, which is in your budget.

**The Chair:** Please remember, Mr. Oberle, that the tradition has been that we don't know what you do in your caucus. Caucuses have budgets based on an allocation of \$67,407 times the number of private members you have, and then you sort that out among yourselves.

**Mr. Oberle:** That's right. But that's increased this year to reflect salary increases.

**The Chair:** No, it has not. It's based on the 1.9 per cent.

**Mr. Oberle:** Oh, I see. Okay.

**The Chair:** We have always been told that you do not want us to govern you in your caucuses. We have rules for everything else. Additional comments?

10:10

**Mr. Weadick:** I'm trying to get a sense of what will happen if we do approve it and what will happen if we don't. I'm trying to get a sense of the impact of the number. So far I'm not even sure who it reflects on. If you could clarify that, as to what the actual money would be expended on and who would receive it, so I get a better sense of what that's for.

**Mr. Hehr:** My understanding is that this will cover our existing office as it stands right now, okay? So as it stands, these are just basically the inflationary figures and market adjustments that have occurred over the course of the last year in the Alberta marketplace, that we'll be able to keep our office up and going as a going concern. That is what this is, and that's what we're requesting.

**The Chair:** Additional questions, comments?

**Mr. Weadick:** Does this reflect something different, then, than the other caucuses would be receiving, such as the third party?

**The Chair:** All caucus presentations here are treated exactly the same way in the presentation we've made.

**Mr. Weadick:** So everybody right now would get the 1.9.

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Mr. Weadick:** This is an ask above and beyond the 1.9.

**The Chair:** Yes. That's correct.

**Mr. Weadick:** Thank you.

**Mr. Taylor:** I would point out to Mr. Weadick that should the government members' caucus wish to make a similar motion, should the leader of the third party wish to make a similar motion, each one of those motions could be dealt with in turn. The fact that we are doing an ask on behalf of the Official Opposition caucus, while specific, in no way is intended to exclude the same approach being taken to other caucuses.

**Mr. Oberle:** I would just point out that the government caucus is not going to make such a motion. We'll deal with our staffing salary increases and whatever other business arises this year within the parameters of the current budget.

**The Chair:** Mr. Rodney.

**Mr. Rodney:** My question was answered, and I'll just lend support to the previous speaker. The government caucus is not asking for any more money. I don't know what our NDP friends are thinking about, but I'm thinking about the Alberta taxpayer. I don't know what they'd be thinking about this, but I know what I think of it, and I won't be supporting it.

**The Chair:** Additional speakers?

**Mr. Hehr:** I understand the comments that have been made. Nonetheless, there has to be some recognition of some sort of economies of scale, the fact that there are, you know, 47 of you, nine of us. There has to be some sort of common-sense analysis as to what, in fact, the taxpayer of Alberta gets – I'm aware of that – but also what kind of opposition we provide. That should also be on the minds of us in this room as well as the taxpayer out there. We can only do as good a job as what we're given resources to do. I leave that comment for you to weigh as we go forward in this.

**The Chair:** Normally the mover of the motion would be the last one to speak, but I'll be flexible. Mr. Oberle.

**Mr. Oberle:** Thank you for that, Mr. Chair. I just want to point out to Mr. Hehr that we certainly support a strong, healthy opposition. Perhaps Mr. Hehr wasn't here the last time – I don't recall – but we did discuss economies of scale, as he put it. If you take a calculator and calculate what the funding per member is for the government caucus, the Official Opposition, and the third-party opposition, you'll find that both of the opposition parties receive significantly more per-member funding than the government caucus does. When we discussed that last time, we talked that perhaps the Official Opposition would be coming back to address some of the questions I raised about staffing during that meeting and were recorded in the record, but I haven't seen any adjustments to that. The fact remains that if you calculate it out, it works out to a significantly higher number per member in each of the opposition caucuses.

**The Chair:** Additional comments?

On the motion put forward by Mr. Hehr and seconded by Mr. VanderBurg, would all honourable members in favour of the motion please say aye.\* All opposed, please say no. The motion is defeated.

Okay. Mr. Mason, you indicated to me that you wanted to make a comment with respect to tab 11.

**Mr. Mason:** Yes, please, Mr. Speaker. I guess I'm next up to bat. I am going to propose an amendment to the NDP opposition services budget. Under committee support, which is now \$192,591, I'm going to move to amend that with an additional \$150,000, which would bring the number, according to my math, to \$342,591. That would change the budget number for NDP opposition services from \$561,000 to \$711,000, and it would change the total voted expenditure on the revised document from \$58,446,000 to \$58,596,000. Do we require a seconder in committee?

**The Chair:** Not really, but this morning we're sort of going with it. We're kind of flexible. If you don't get a seconder, I'll still allow discussion on it. We're not going to get uptight here. You know, it's February 2009.

Anyway, would anybody like to second that just for clarity? Mr. Hehr. Okay. Discussion now on the motion.

**Mr. Mason:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Mr. Mason would like to add \$150,000 to the proposed caucus budget item that is before you.

**Mr. Mason:** Under committee support. Mr. Speaker, as we talked in the meeting during the summer, we've done a very rough calculation of the cost for us to employ staff, and the all-in cost is about \$59,000 per. This would allow us to add three research staff positions. We would find the additional money within our existing budget.

I just want to go over the reasons for this. First of all, I want to say that we're not saying that because our caucus is smaller than it was, we need to compensate for that with more staff. But the workload on our caucus has grown very dramatically, and I want to point out to members of the committee that we're participating on all of the standing policy field committees as well as the special standing committees. With our present resources, having now gone through a session, we do not believe that we can sustain that level of participation with the current resources. Not only do we have half the caucus that we had before the election, but the number of committees that we sit on has increased by two, so we are actually covering two more committees with two people than we did before the election with four people. We've been added to the Heritage Savings Trust Fund Committee – Rachel is on that – and of course we've increased the standing policy field committees by one as well. So we're members of all of those committees.

I'm a member of the Public Accounts Committee, Resources and Environment, Economy, and the Members' Services Committee. Rachel is a member of the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund Committee, the Legislative Offices Committee, the Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing Committee, the Community Services policy committee, the Health policy committee, the Public Safety and Services policy committee, and she also participated in the Select Special Ethics Commissioner Search Committee.

Mr. Speaker and members of the committee, I believe that we have a problem in sustaining that level of participation in the committees, and we can't continue to do that unless we have some additional research support. So that's the pitch.

\*See p. 29, left col., para. 9, line 2



10:20

**The Chair:** Participants? Questions? Answers? Anybody else want to get involved? Well, then I think I'm going to have to call the question.

**Mr. Mason:** Well, I'll just close the debate, Mr. Speaker. I'm not going to be surprised by the vote here, but I do want to just remind members of the committee, I guess, of a couple of things. I know that circumstances have changed in the last few months economically and that the government wants to set an example of not increasing budgets and so on, but I would make the case that this is a special case and that the argument for it, I think, is outside the general restraint. We have removed in this budget \$189,000 in caucus funding contingency, so the actual budget for the caucuses as a whole has been reduced by that amount. That has gone to other parts of the budget.

I guess the last argument I'll make is that an effective opposition is actually one of the best economic measures that government can take, that an effective opposition actually can keep expenditures in check by challenging expenditures that might not be entirely justified or might be just wants and not needs. I think that it's a good investment with respect to a belt-tightening sort of regime.

**The Chair:** There's a motion before us presented by Mr. Mason that effectively would read that

the committee support apportionment of the NDP opposition services be increased by \$150,000.

All hon. members in favour, please say aye. Those opposed, please say no. It's defeated.

**Mr. VanderBurg:** Mr. Speaker, on the last motion that Mr. Kent Hehr made, I think you said that I had seconded it.

**The Chair:** Yes, I did.

**Mr. VanderBurg:** I had seconded the motion for the southern Alberta office.

**The Chair:** Oh, that's right. Okay. The secretary caught it. I said that, but she caught it, saying that Mr. Taylor said it.\*

**Mr. VanderBurg:** Okay.

**The Chair:** Important for the record.

We now have the budget before us. Are there any other questions or comments that members would want to raise with respect to this budget proposal? Then might I ask for your support? The Clerk will now have to give us the new number based on the adjustment that was made. In the sheet that you would have before you there we're asking for a budget with a net expenditure of \$57,882,000. Clerk, by how much is that adjusted now?

**Dr. McNeil:** By rounding up by \$4,000.

**The Chair:** So what would the new number be: \$57,886,000?

**Dr. McNeil:** Yeah. The total voted expenditure here is \$58,908,000.

**The Chair:** Pardon me. Where are you getting \$908,000?

**Dr. McNeil:** Sorry about that. It's \$58,450,000.

**The Chair:** Okay. You have the sheet in front of you. You can see that the total voted expenditure would now read \$58,450,000. Then

it has revenue of \$564,000 for a total net expenditure. That would be what you'd be voting. Would somebody kindly – oh, you even rounded it off. Even better. So the total request is for a budget of \$58,448,500. Somebody want to move a motion? Mr. Weadick. Somebody second it? Mr. Rodney. Discussion?

**Hon. Members:** Question.

**The Chair:** Question. All in favour, please say aye.

**Hon. Members:** Aye.

**The Chair:** Opposed, please say no. Thank you very much.

We'll make that particular adjustment, and we'll have it in there. I appreciate that. I sincerely hope that nothing further will deteriorate. This budget will be refined now and will be submitted through the normal course of events.

I do not know when the provincial budget will come down, but the custom is that when the minister of finance tables the documents, attached to it is a single document dealing with the Legislative Assembly, and we have rules within the standing orders as to how this budget is dealt with.

The next item, then, on the agenda. I received two memos. One memo that I received came from Mr. Anderson, basically dealing with the subject of professional development. There's a memo in here, and I put it on the agenda. In essence, I believe what Mr. Anderson is saying is that he would like to have provision under the constituency budget to allow members to attend professional development activities. Nothing in the memo determines the amount, the registration parameters, whether or not there would be travel expenses associated with it, whether this be in or out of Alberta, although it seems to read just within Alberta, and what type of conference this would be.

Just to have a little fun with you, Mr. Anderson, should this be approved, perhaps the first professional development conference we would send you to would be one dealing with . . .

**An Hon. Member:** Spelling.

**The Chair:** Yes. I won't mention it.

I invited Mr. Anderson to come here this morning to amplify if he would like to, so I'll recognize you, Mr. Anderson, if you wish.

**Mr. Anderson:** Well, thank you. I was going to point that out anyway, that perhaps I need some professional development in many ways, actually, but spelling is definitely one of them.

The reason I brought this forward is that, actually, something came up in my duties as an MLA. There were a couple of conferences. One was dealing with energy, and one was dealing with our economic situation, and I wanted to attend those conferences. There was, of course, a cost involved to get to and from the conferences, and the conferences were quite expensive. I assumed that as an MLA I could use my existing constituency budget, which I have been very prudent with over this year, so there is enough in that budget to go to two or three conferences a year at least that would help me develop as an MLA and better understand the issues that affect our province.

You know, when you're dealing with these issues like a royalty framework and the oil sands and the environmental issues surrounding those things as well as the economy and what type of public policy we should be looking at, I think it's important that MLAs be properly educated in these things. Frankly, that education should start not just with discussing it in the actual House but outside,

\*See p. 28, right col., para. 2, line 3

talking to people who are experts in their fields. A lot of times the only opportunity as an MLA you're going to get to do that is to go to a conference where qualified individuals are speaking.

I want to be clear that I'm not asking that our budgets be increased in any way for this. Budgets would completely remain the same. To avoid abuses of the system, if there were some other parameters involved – you know, a cap on what you could spend on what conference – I'm all open to that. I guess the basic idea is that we should be allowed to use our existing constituency budget to go to professional development activities.

That's it.

**The Chair:** I'll recognize speakers in just a second. Just by way of a little background right now, there are three options to attend professional development conferences currently available to members who are elected. One is through the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. I invite members on an annual basis to attend one of six or seven or eight different kinds of activities that can be anywhere in the world, inside of Alberta or outside of Alberta. It's done on a fair basis to provide at least one opportunity every term for each member to attend such a development.

Secondly, oftentimes members of Executive Council will invite members to attend professional development conferences. Various ministers will do it, and some will do it with members of the opposition as well. PNWER conferences, Pacific Northwest Economic Region conferences: ministers involved there select members from all parties in the Assembly and offer them an opportunity to attend, and others have invited private members to visit or to attend a conference, again, in Alberta and outside of Alberta.

10:30

The third option you have is to use caucus funds to do it. In this case, if the dollars are allocated towards caucuses, we've always allowed that in the past. If caucuses chose to send somebody to a conference in or outside of Alberta, we've accepted that, and various caucuses in the past have used that to their benefit. When we had the independent member in the last term, Mr. Hinman used this on numerous occasions during the year to attend conferences, professional development conferences outside of Alberta and inside of Alberta.

So we have those three options. Under those three options one is that somebody else is dealing with the private member. Under the proposal that Mr. Anderson is making, I would think that the member himself would make the choice as to who goes where or what, so that begets a series of questions as well. Anyway, I throw it open.

**Mr. Mason:** Well, Mr. Speaker, I guess with respect to this my view is that the constituency budget is there to help you serve your constituents. I agree with Mr. Anderson that there is a lot of value in some of these things. I've looked at a number of things that come across my e-mail inviting me to conferences, and there are, you know, pretty steep registration fees for them, and I've not attended ones because of that reason. It does seem to me that this is a more appropriate function for the caucus budget rather than a constituency budget. I guess that would be my view.

**Mr. Rodney:** I'll make a set of comments. You might think I'm leaning one way. Then I'll make another set, and you might think it's the other. The first set of comments is that we just passed a budget, so I don't know how we would find room, and as Mr. Anderson has indicated, he's not asking for an increase in budgets.

So you might think that I'm saying: well, we shouldn't be doing this. There is no need to poke fun at titles, but it's obvious that we all can use professional development in many respects.

I really appreciate that the Speaker, the chair, has indicated at least three different ways. I know I've gleaned a whole lot of knowledge utilizing one or two of them, and I think the general public would agree, well, that whether we're in medicine or education or business and perhaps especially now, we should be learning and getting out there.

I would suggest that perhaps a formal request be put in but for next year's budget, perhaps, and that in the meantime indeed we do access caucus funds or at least put the requests in. There are a number of things that catch people's eyes, and they realize, you know: I really need something on – it might be computer literacy or whatever is, and it may not necessarily catch the eye of at least two of the other options that the chair had mentioned. In summary, I'm just thinking that we could move forward right now with the existing options that we have and perhaps a more formal notification later.

As Mr. Mason has pointed out, some of these things can be pricey. I know that if you were looking to even do a two-day conference and had to stay overnight and travel and have some meals, 500 bucks wouldn't get you very far.

In summary, I think we have a number of options before us already, but let's not be blind to options for the future. Thank you, Chair.

**Mr. VanderBurg:** I support the request. I know that over the years the FCM conferences, for example, where our municipalities – and in my case I have, like you, 20 mayors and councillors that like to go to these events and make requests for our constituency and get federal support. Many times the mayors and councillors have asked that I attend with them and help lobby for support for our constituency, and I've done so out of my own pocket, yet every year I return funds out of my constituency budget back to the Assembly. So I think that I would use this, and I think I would be a better MLA, and I could in turn be better to my constituents if I had this available. I may attend the FCM every year rather than just when our councils have a motion that needs support and needed to do some lobbying in the hallways. I don't think I've ever gone to an FCM conference where I haven't learned something to take back home.

**The Chair:** Okay. You used the acronym FCM. Just for the benefit of all: FCM?

**Mr. VanderBurg:** Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Mrs. Leskiw:** I'm not against professional development. As a schoolteacher I went to quite a few of them. But when money is tight, I don't think this particular year we should be spending money on sending people to professional development. When times are good, spending money on professional development is helpful and that. But it's like everything else: when money is tight, you stay at home. What I'm trying to say is that we've put a freeze on our salaries and a freeze on things. I think that for this coming year I just can't support spending extra money on professional development.

**The Chair:** Mr. Weadick.

**Mr. Weadick:** Thank you very much. I'm going to support the idea behind this. Each one of us represents a unique and different

constituency, and each of those constituencies has different needs and different challenges. For me it might be the feedlot industry around Lethbridge whereas for someone up here it may have no impact. Understanding the economics of my community and my constituency and the people around can be extremely important in my coming here to represent them.

We're not talking about new money or budgets from Edmonton; we're talking about money that has been given to an MLA within his constituency to try to represent those people the absolute best that he can. If to do that there is a need to attend something – we're all adults here. We do our very, very best – I've seen it from everyone – to try to represent our constituencies.

There are times when maybe a beef congress or a certain type of a business conference that's happening that impacts our community would be very, very helpful to be at so that I can understand some of the issues that are impacting our community. For many of us those don't happen in Vegreville and Lethbridge. They'll happen in Calgary and Edmonton often, in the bigger centres, where you're going to have to go to Calgary if you want to take in some of that. You either pay for it yourself, or this would allow the opportunity that if you have a little bit of room in your budget and there's something happening that would impact you, you could go and do it.

I think it's very important to allow MLAs to be able to do that, so I would be supporting Mr. Anderson. I support the principle. If there needs to be some set-up as to how we do it, I don't have a problem with that, but I like the principle.

**The Chair:** Mr. Hehr.

**Mr. Hehr:** Well, thank you very much. You know, I understand the need for professional development and for people going out and learning, but really I can't support this coming through our own individual budgets, and there are a couple of reasons why I won't. One, we already have cleavages between what it costs to run an urban office, rural office, and all of those things. Right now I know in my budget I'm running pretty close to 100 per cent capacity. I don't think there has been a lot of fluff in there. It has been serving constituents of Calgary-Buffalo, doing things on their behalf and hearing their concerns.

Maybe in other budgets there's more room to play with or, in your case, to send back to the government or otherwise. That's just, I think, a recognition that we all understand in this room. I think the process that already exists allows for a fair analysis of what constituency offices cost and what they're provided for, and this is another avenue that we can go about taking professional development learning.

Also, we make a fair bit of money here. We can pay for it out of our own expenses if we want to go learn things.

Third thing: there's lots of free stuff available. I went to a wonderful human rights conference down here by the Sheldon Chumir centre. It's free. There's lots of stuff out there that we can learn.

I'm surprised this would come from you. As government members you can tag along with any minister to numerous amounts of events and even write a letter saying that you're interested in attending. I think you can just show up, and I'm sure they'd be glad to have you there. You might even get to bring greetings from the Legislature, so you'd be killing two birds with one stone.

**10:40**

Nonetheless, that's the reason that I don't think we should complicate our budgets any further. We should have them pretty

clear as to what people are spending them on. When the debate comes, when we say "urban constituencies cost more than rural constituencies, and here's why, and here's why they need more funding or X needs more funding or Y," we can really have a clear debate as apples to apples.

Those are my reasons.

**Mr. VanderBurg:** I just want to make it clear in MLA Leskiw's comments that I don't support increasing our constituency budget to allow this. If it would be done, it would be done within the parameters of the existing budget. As I make choices in my constituency to have an office in Mayerthorpe versus Whitecourt, that is a 50 per cent discount in one community versus the next.

**The Chair:** Mr. Oberle.

**Mr. Oberle:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that one of the beauties of our current constituency budget is that it's pretty clear what's allowable and what is not allowable. At the end of the day we can hold that open to Albertans, and we've had some accountability for the expenditure of those budgets. I might be willing to support this, but I would need some very clear parameters of what's allowed and what's not allowed. Any organization that provides professional development has parameters, and I'd be willing to consider a motion based on parameters, not on just an open-ended: let's allow professional development. So I think maybe we should table this item pending that.

**The Chair:** Do you want me to undertake a review of it and come back with a proposal in six months or something like that? Would that be acceptable? So we'll go on that basis? Okay.

**Mr. Weadick:** Motion to table?

**The Chair:** Sure. Well, we'll just work up something with the whole thing, including the tax-free expense allowance that all members get, that's been mentioned. Okay. We'll go forward, then, with that.

The next one is a memo that we had here from Mr. Lukaszuk. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs sent me a memo dated December 12. Basically, first of all, he says: "I have noticed for some time that the 3,000 kms I am able to charge for automobile allowance each month no longer covers the actual kms that I put on in fulfilling my duties throughout Edmonton, and surrounding area." We'll deal with that one first and then go to the second one.

Members have caps on the automobile mileage allowance they have. Urban members have a maximum of 35,000 kilometres per year, and rural members have 80,000 kilometres per year. Mr. Lukaszuk is an Edmonton member, and basically he's referring to the 35,000. He's also a parliamentary secretary. I invited Mr. Lukaszuk to attend this morning. Unfortunately, he's in southern Alberta.

It would have been my hope that those private members of the Legislative Assembly who are also parliamentary secretaries are not using the mileage allowance given to them as MLAs to pay for activities they're doing as parliamentary secretaries. The same would apply to any other member of the Legislative Assembly who's the chairman of this or the chairperson of that. Their expenses are allocated from whence they are appointed, not to the Legislative Assembly. All members, virtually, are on something.

I don't know. I'm wide open.

**Mr. Oberle:** Mr. Speaker, it's possible that Mr. Lukaszuk has a point here. Could you provide for us, on a summary basis maybe, a breakdown of the urban MLAs and the rural MLAs, how close we come to those mileage caps? Are they, in fact, unfair? I suspect they're not, actually, and along to your previous comment maybe there's some crossover with other duties there. This is the first I've heard of people bumping up against a mileage cap. It hasn't been raised to me.

**The Chair:** To answer your question, we have that information. We'd be happy to spin it out for a future meeting if you wanted to do a comparative with respect to this. I'd just point out to you this. We've had a lot of discussion on these matters over the years. It really doesn't make any difference where you're at in Alberta; it depends what services you have. Mr. Weadick may come from Lethbridge, Alberta, but he has air service from Lethbridge, Alberta. Mr. Mitzel, who lives south of Medicine Hat, has no air service. They're basically the same distance away. Mr. Griffiths, who comes from the Wainwright area, is literally four hours away. Mrs. Leskiw is three and a half, but she has options for air service. Mr. VanderBurg has no options for air service, and Mr. Oberle may or may not.

**Mrs. Leskiw:** We have no option for air service in Bonnyville.

**The Chair:** Then out of Cold Lake.

**Mr. Oberle:** I do in fact have options for air service, Mr. Speaker, but I'll point out that on the mileage claim form you're allowed trips to and from Edmonton independent of your mileage claims.

**The Chair:** Absolutely. Yeah. It's 52 trips.

**Mr. Oberle:** So whether or not you have air service wouldn't matter. In this particular case we're talking about an Edmonton MLA.

**Mr. Taylor:** Who has transit service.

**Mr. Oberle:** Who has transit service, as Mr. Taylor points out.

**The Chair:** Anyway, we'd be happy to review the whole thing. Yes, Mr. Clerk?

**Dr. McNeil:** I can just say that over the last three years the average take-up of the mileage is about 50 per cent overall.

**Mr. Mason:** Mr. Speaker, I just want to make the comment – and it follows up on your remarks – that if someone is a parliamentary secretary and is doing that work, then that ought to be budgeted through the department.

**The Chair:** Absolutely.

**Mr. Mason:** You know, it is an Edmonton MLA, and I'd be happy to vote for a bus pass.

**The Chair:** Well, I guess, if you want the afterthought, one of the great changes in the benefit package to MLAs occurred, actually, in 1978 or 1979, when the MLAs had none of these benefits. They were all given a Greyhound bus pass. Unlimited travel from their constituency to the capital. It was a great day. You didn't get any pins, but you got the bus pass.

Okay. I understand what you're basically saying.

Now, the second one is that the \$750 postage cap paid for outgoing mail from the LAO budget falls far short of the correspondence being mailed to constituents. Well, remember, we also have a communication portion under the constituency office allocation. Once again, does anybody want to raise any items on this? Okay. We'll respond to Mr. Lukaszuk, thanking him.

The one additional item that I have in here is something that I have to draw to your attention because this is a decision we have to make in the upcoming fiscal year. It comes under a statement in there called Long Term Funding Considerations. I'd just like to spend a couple of minutes giving you the background, and I'll ask the Clerk to participate as well. We provide broadcasting of segments of the Alberta Legislative Assembly Routine. We have a contract with CTV to produce those House proceedings, and we have a second contract with Access television to broadcast the daily Routine. This has been going on for a long period of time.

Recently, however, the situation has changed. Access has now been purchased by CTV. There'll be a new format for Access coming out. The contract that we have with CTV expired on December 31, 2008, so we had a discussion and a negotiation with CTV, now the owner of Access as well, and they've agreed to basically renew their services to us to March 31, 2010. That's the same date on which our contract with Access expires.

When the government of Alberta owned Access, it was part of the provisions that Access had to provide a segment of time for the televised proceedings of the Alberta Legislative Assembly. We're sitting here right now where, basically, to March 31, 2010, we have a service provided to us. However, there's one other complicating factor, and that is that the equipment that's in place is all outdated.

Secondly, there's no redundancy plan put in place. If the equipment fails in the Speech from the Throne next Tuesday afternoon, that's it. It ends. There's no backup equipment, and it can't be dealt with in any way on a short-term basis. We've known about this for the last couple of years and have been working on this, but I didn't want to bring it to your attention because of the implications. I didn't want to put another couple-of-million-dollar item in the budget.

Currently the contract with CTV is for approximately \$400,000 a year. It's \$370,770 for the broadcasting plus the broadcast of the budget presentation that afternoon. We don't know when it is, and we have to know because in order to give them the time to get the slot, it's going to cost us a minimum of \$26,000 to rent the airspace for that. It costs for Access approximately \$285,000 a year.

Now, we've talked about the gavel-to-gavel presentation. It's impossible because we cannot buy the time on another network, so it's a basis of no redundancy, equipment owned by CTV, and the need to replace that equipment. The one thing that we do own as a government is the sound system, and that's owned by Alberta Infrastructure and the Legislative Assembly.

**10:50**

We've been spending some time looking at this and looking at the parameters and looking at the options. There are a number of options that, basically, we have to deal with. One is that we arrive on April 1, 2010, and shut it down, no longer provide it. That's certainly an option.

The second option is that we enter into a further negotiation, presumably with CTV, and basically have to work out a formula in terms of how the new equipment is going to be brought in, what type of new equipment it would be. Would it be HD? Would it be technologically advanced to whatever point in time that is, recognizing that six months after you make the decision, there's some other new gizmo on the market that leads you?

Thirdly, do we basically look at what other provinces have done and see whether or not we create our own system? We did have such a system in place in the late '70s and late '80s, but then it was shut down in the events of 1993, 1992, 1994, that whole response in a negative way to the economic situation. If you have satellite television, you can go home at night and you can watch the Ontario Parliament, you can watch the British Columbia Parliament, and I think you can watch a couple of others. Other provinces' Legislative Assemblies have done that as well.

So we're looking at all the options. We wanted to give you this bit of background this morning.

David, you had something on the technical side, please, and then we'll go to some questions.

**Dr. McNeil:** What in-house broadcasting would mean would be the creation of a studio in the space that we're in now or some other space in the Legislature Building to produce a broadcast-quality production of gavel-to-gavel coverage. Right now we provide gavel-to-gavel coverage on the Internet. So in terms of the quality of what's available, the picture and sound, you know, it's marginal compared to what you'd see if you watched it on television. In the two options here for the one sort of standard definition of quality the payback period in terms of the capital expenditure that we calculated was something like 3.6 years. The payback period for the HD production capability would be about four and a half years.

**The Chair:** That's if we buy this.

**Dr. McNeil:** If we buy, yes. This would be the in-house option kind of thing. So most jurisdictions in the country do their own production of not only the Assembly proceedings but also committee proceedings, any special events. They use their broadcast time that they have primarily on satellite for other educational purposes as far as providing the public with, you know, information about the parliament and activities and so on. What an in-house production would do would give you more capability to do more things, providing more information to members for their use, for example. It's quite a marked difference from what we do now, but what we do now is quite a bit different from what's done in most of the other parliaments across the country.

**The Chair:** Questions, comments. Mr. Rodney, and then Mr. Taylor.

**Mr. Rodney:** Well, thank you, Chair, and I'm really glad to see this on the agenda. I look forward to it being discussed at future meetings as well because this is the experience, I'm sure, of everyone around the table, that you happen to tune in either on satellite or while visiting friends and family in different provinces, and you see what is happening in other parliaments and legislatures. Sure, it's not going to break all kinds of box office records or viewership, but I know I've learned a lot. There are cheap ways of delivering it, whether it be via satellite, web, or otherwise, and we all know that the delivery methods are changing all the time, as is the list of accoutrements required. Some costs are going up, but many are going down.

Option one to me is not really an option. I think we'd all agree that we're not going to be shutting this down in a certain period of time. It's just a matter of: what are the options, as has been mentioned with point 2? Number three, I think it's a very worthwhile exercise to find out what other groups could do this, including in-house. I'm not looking to spend a whole bunch of extra money, but I think we could spend a reasonable amount of money and have

something that's really world class as long as we have proceedings in the Legislature that are the same.

**The Chair:** Mr. Taylor.

**Mr. Taylor:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Obviously, we've got, I think, a pretty good presentation here in terms of the relative merits of an in-house production capability of one sort or the other, either standard or high definition, as opposed to continuing to contract out to an outside broadcaster. What I don't see in here – and maybe it's been taken into consideration already – is the delivery, so I'm curious as to whether there are any firm plans there, any definite proposals: our own cable channel, our own satellite channel, renting time through somebody else's channel. We go to all this trouble and deliver high-quality, broadcast-quality programming, content. What's the delivery system going to be so that people can actually watch our smiling faces?

**The Chair:** We've had tentative discussion with respect to that, and Clerk, you can jump in on this. I think the optimum would be to have our own channel, which means, I guess, we'd have to have an application before the CRTC and get approval from CRTC. Clerk, do you want to add something to that?

**Dr. McNeil:** Yeah. If we do legislative broadcasts, I don't think we need CRTC approval.

**The Chair:** Okay.

**Dr. McNeil:** There's something in their legislation that provides us the ability to do that without CRTC approval. One of the difficulties right now is that technology is changing so fast. You start out today and say: "Cable is the best bet. Let's go cable." Then, you know, a year later satellite becomes the best option. I think that in the long run, I'd say in four or five years, you're probably talking about being able to deliver over the Internet the same kind of quality that you'll deliver via satellite or cable. The pipes aren't big enough right now to deliver that quality, but that, I think, in the long run is where we would be going. Given the penetration of the Internet in households, in five years that might be viable, but I suspect that in the shorter term we might be looking at some combination of cable and satellite.

The thing about Alberta is that we're, you know, well served by cable companies. Access has, I think, about 95 per cent market penetration in Alberta. But, again, they can't deliver gavel to gavel.

**Mr. Taylor:** Well, Mr. Chair, I'd like to see a firm proposal with dollar figures attached to it, obviously, for how we're going to deliver the content before we proceed any further with these plans. I'm all in favour of it in principle, but we need to have firm plans for where we're going.

**The Chair:** No, no. I've got to work through this. I mean, Members' Services is not going micromanage this sort of thing. You make the decision that we're going to have a system or we're not, and then the rest of us will take care of it. But part of the dilemma is what technology you deal with because once you've made the decision – I'll give you a crazy little story. When the province of Alberta decided to do natural gas lines throughout the whole province, it was the early 1970s. Great. A hundred thousand, a hundred and fifty thousand homes were connected for natural gas with a pipe. Nobody had ever heard of fibre optics when the decision was made.

By the time the program was implemented, fibre optics were the order of the day. If that fibre optic had been there four years earlier, every farmhouse and rural house in this province could be connected to cable television, high speed Internet, and everything else, and it wouldn't cost anything to do. But it was a time warp. We spent 80 years building, you know, telephone lines with poles in the ground. Then with the wireless you don't need it anymore. That's the dilemma here.

Mr. Elniski.

**Mr. Elniski:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. Again, I also agree. I don't know what technology would be the best, but in my constituency we've gone to fairly great lengths to ensure that all of our senior citizens' homes are in fact equipped to watch sessions gavel to gavel. They do it, of course, through Shaw. It's a very, very popular little way for people to spend their afternoons and their evenings, and they're very, very well attended. I think the proof is in the pudding. People want the service. I think that it's something where the broader it is, the easier it is for people to get it, the higher the quality – I think the opportunity is there. This is something we need to do.

11:00

**The Chair:** Well, the fundamental question that we have to just, you know, look straight in the eye is that this is called democracy. If people have access to the democratic institution, that's the ultimate. If they're denied it, then there's a problem.

Anyway, we will continue to work on this. We're going to have to make some progress. The position that I'm basically in as Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, as I'll tell you right now, is that I'm biased in favour of this. I'm biased in favour of expanding the formatting of it all. I believe that there should be gavel-to-gavel coverage of all sessions of the Alberta Legislative Assembly and all committees thereof. People should have access to it in the greatest possible way. I'm not convinced that the computer is the absolute solution. It may be 10 years from now, a number of years from now, but it is not today. Television still remains the medium of choice. Sorry, Mr. Taylor; I was going to say radio, but then they don't see your smiling face.

I also think there are some great opportunities if we had our own in-house production. In essence, we could afford opportunities for individual members to have a report of X number of minutes per week if they chose to do it, to have it there. Their constituents could watch it. You could have other kinds of discussions. You could have opportunities to provide each caucus, as an example, a segment of time to provide their own messages each week at designated times. You could do a whole series of other things. I mean, the tourism industry would benefit, I would think, dramatically from it. You could have great little programs in there on visiting Alberta. You could do something about the history of Alberta. You could really expand it and blow your mind with it if you wanted to do it. You don't have to do all the production in-house by the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, but if you had the time and you had the space and you owned it, then you could. So I'm biased in that regard.

The last item that I would like to just deal with momentarily and shortly is that I'm going to ask Allison to circulate a little document we're working on. It's becoming a very interesting discussion. This is a draft, and it says "draft" on it. I'm just going to introduce it very, very briefly, and then I'm going to leave it with you. We're going to continue to work on it, and we're going to continue to refine it. I'm sorry about the size of the lettering. That's why it has "draft" on it.

There are certain guidelines that we have agreed to and we follow. One is called the expenditure guidelines for Members of the Alberta

Legislative Assembly. This is a document that we've developed over the years, agreed to. It discusses all the expenditure guidelines. There are acceptable communication expenses, noncompliant ones. You know, you can do certain things within your constituency office allocations. You can't add any item that bears any political logo, promotes political party activities, solicits political party funds or memberships, or contains personal criticism of another member. There are a whole series of other guidelines that we have dealt with.

Then over the years we have spent some time dealing with caucus expenditure guidelines. This was approved effective December 14, 2006, and it very specifically points out what can be done and what cannot be done. There are restrictions on caucus expenditures.

- Caucus activities and transactions should be separate and distinct from party activities, party identity (logos, colors, web pages), events or transactions, and particularly election activities . . .
- There should be no appearance of influencing the voting public by making payments to individuals or organizations that are donations (cash or in-kind) or are of a fundraising nature.

These are guidelines to be followed here. We give them to the Auditor General. The Auditor General wants to start doing auditing of caucus expenditures. We're sort of suggesting to him that it's not really required. So we do some, and sometimes we get a little miffed.

The most recent area that we're now going to venture into is something called Website Guidelines for Members of the Legislative Assembly, Constituency Offices, and Caucus Offices. Please remember the two things that I talked about before: party identity – logos, colours, web pages – and events or transactions. We're going to continue to work on this, and I'm going to bring it back to a committee of the Members' Services Committee. In the meantime I'd like each member to basically look through it, take your pencil and paper out, scribble on it, give me suggestions and everything else with respect to it.

We're starting to enter into a new domain here now, where either we're going to have to throw everything wide open or we're going to have to retract. If I see public dollars expended by MLAs through their constituency office allocation, we pick them up internally. A memo is sent, basically saying that you cannot use these funds for this particular thing, and please refund it, return the dollars, or, if you wish to go and see the Speaker, you can appeal to the Speaker. Well, I've had maybe one or two appeals in 11 years. That's it. The answer, generally, is that you're not going to win your appeal.

There have been interesting scenarios in the last couple of years with respect to caucuses. It gets more interesting the closer you get to an election. People seem to forget that they're not political appointees in the caucuses. The PC Association of Alberta has an office. The Liberal association of Alberta has an office. The NDP association of Alberta has an office. They have nothing to do with the caucus budgets. It used to be that it was the government caucus, the Official Opposition caucus, and the third-party caucus. Now it's clearly the Progressive Conservative caucus, the Alberta Liberal caucus, and the NDP caucus. But when you start using some of these logos and party names and party colours and everything else on websites that are paid for by the taxpayers of Alberta, there may be some crossing of a line here, and the big shoe from above might have to come down.

We're getting into a domain now because not only do you have a website; then you have links with websites. If it's not clear that the link you go to is your own political party thing and if the assumption is that the public is paying for it, then that's when our mail goes up and the phones go up and you have to spend a whole bunch of money dealing with this thing.

It's confused, of course, by what happens in Ottawa. They should have rules, in my humble opinion, that basically say that politics stays out of all this stuff. But I'm sorry; they've flipped over so long ago, including the newsletters they have, the websites they have, the 10-percenters they have. They invade other MPs' territories with really scandalous stuff.

I don't think that's the way the people of Alberta really want it. I just throw it out to you to take a look at it. Get back to us. We'll deal with it again. In the meantime I hope that there's instruction given to the people, the hotshots in all your caucuses who believe that they run the world, that they should just tie the laces on their shoes and remember that they are employees, not bosses. I'm looking at the bosses around this table. They do not know what's best for you, by the way.

Additional items?

**Mr. Mason:** We can't top that, Mr. Speaker.

**The Chair:** You can't? Additional items?

**Mr. Mason:** This, really, is something I wanted to bring up in connection with the TV coverage. I wonder if we could take a look at the media room in the basement of the Legislative Assembly. Now, it's my understanding that that room is not considered part of the Legislative Assembly that is under the control of the Speaker's office.

**The Chair:** It is not.

**Mr. Mason:** I know that the Premier's communications office has a direct link. It's all miked in there all the time, not just when somebody is using it. That space is very important for all of the caucuses, and I think it should be neutral. I think it should be a neutral space. So I would request, Mr. Speaker, as part of that, if you could take a look at the media room with a view to coming back with recommendations about who is, basically, in charge of the space. I would prefer, Mr. Speaker, if it was under your jurisdiction.

**The Chair:** It was at one time with the Speaker, but there's some history here associated with this. In the late 1980s the Speaker of the day was Dr. David Carter. The media decided that they were going to have fun with him, and they started portraying him as a very difficult person to deal with because Speaker Carter suggested that there should be rules for the media.

**11:10**

At that time they were allowed to come into the Confederation Room to do scrums with government ministers. They started doing stupid things like walking on the tables and destroying valuable tables with scuffy feet and shoes. The Speaker basically said: "No, you cannot be in the Confederation Room anymore. You have to be out in the hallway." They undertook a personal, massive campaign against him, which was supported by the opposition parties.

The Speaker then came to the government and said: look, I can't control this anymore. The government minister he came to was the minister of public works, supply and services, who just coinciden-

tally happened to be me. He said: "I'm sorry. You have to take over authority for these parts of the building, including the media room." I said: "No. That would be totally inappropriate. We think that should stay with the Speaker and the Legislative Assembly of Alberta." He said: "No. I can't win on this one because they've got me in a corner. They're going to kill me in the media and the opposition parties."

It's really quite coincidental that 21 years later the request is made to go the other way. The problem is that once having made that passageway, it's very difficult, Mr. Mason. I don't know how I'm going to go back and do that. I never supported it in the first place, but I don't have a reason for saying why it should be changed now and put into the control of the Legislative Assembly. If, in fact, we went to a new media configuration, perhaps there may be an opportunity for different venues or different opportunities. Again, my comment I repeat: sometimes if you get what you ask for, you may not want to get what you ask for.

I thought you wanted that history.

**Mr. Mason:** I've heard the history before, Mr. Speaker.

**The Chair:** Well, it's the truth.

**Mr. Mason:** But we have a new Speaker now, and I'm sure you'll have no problem stopping the reporters from dancing on the tables in the media room.

**The Chair:** Well, you can back them up from the halls, then, because when government ministers want to go into the Confederation Room, they're blocked. Then, of course, there are interceptions there, and they're basically told: you can't go there. Then when members are walking up the steps, there's blockage there. You just have to find a fair opportunity for everybody. But dancing on the tables was not a good one.

Others?

**Mr. Rodney:** I presume that point 6, date of next meeting, will be at the call of the chair.

**The Chair:** Yes, it would. Look, if in the next period of time till the provincial budget comes down – and I don't know when it will be. If, in fact, the whole world were to suffer more cardiac arrest – who knows? – it may be important that we meet again. But I'm not suggesting or thinking that's going to happen. I think that we'll probably wait until the session is well under way. We'll refine some of this other paper, and we'll just have an opportunity not so much for budgets but to discuss some of these policy issues. Would that be appropriate?

Allison, there could be some administrative paper that you can circulate to members.

Okay. Can I have a motion, then, to adjourn? Mr. Oberle. Everybody agree?

Thank you so much for this morning.

[The committee adjourned at 11:13 a.m.]







