



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
First Session

Special Standing Committee
on
Members' Services

Tuesday, March 1, 2016
1 p.m.

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First Session**

Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

Wanner, Hon. Robert E., Medicine Hat (ND), Chair
Schmidt, Marlin, Edmonton-Gold Bar (ND), Deputy Chair

Cooper, Nathan, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills (W)
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Fildebrandt, Derek Gerhard, Strathmore-Brooks (W)
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Malkinson, Brian, Calgary-Currie (ND)**
McIver, Ric, Calgary-Hays (PC)
McLean, Stephanie V., Calgary-Varsity (ND)
Nielsen, Christian E., Edmonton-Decore (ND)
Nixon, Jason, Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre (W)
Piquette, Colin, Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater (ND)
Schreiner, Kim, Red Deer-North (ND)

* substitution for Marlin Schmidt

** substitution for Stephanie McLean

Also in Attendance

Clark, Greg, Calgary-Elbow (AP)
Jabbour, Deborah C., Peace River (ND)
Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (ND)

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W.J. David McNeil	Clerk
Allison Quast	Executive Assistant to the Clerk
Bev Alenius	Chief of Staff to the Speaker
Robert H. Reynolds, QC	Law Clerk/Director of Interparliamentary Relations
Shannon Dean	Senior Parliamentary Counsel/ Director of House Services
Karen Sawchuk	Committee Clerk
Brian G. Hodgson	Sergeant-at-Arms
Cheryl Scarlett	Director of Human Resources, Information Technology and Broadcast Services
Scott Ellis	Director and Senior Financial Officer, Financial Management and Administrative Services
Janet Schwegel	Managing Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

1 p.m.**Tuesday, March 1, 2016**

[Mr. Wanner in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the meeting to order. I would advise the public that the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services is about to begin. As I understand it, we have some substitutions again today. Member Cortes-Vargas is substituting for the hon. Mr. Schmidt, and Mr. Malkinson is substituting for the hon. Stephanie McLean. I'm also advised that we have some members joining us via teleconference, Mr. Nixon and Mr. Fildebrandt. We have some guests with us today who are not committee members, Member Greg Clark, Member Heather Sweet, and I believe Deputy Speaker Jabbour will be joining. I'm not sure if she is with us yet or not. She is? Great. Thank you.

I'd ask the members and those joining the committee at the table . . . [An electronic device sounded] Welcome, Mr. McIver.

Mr. McIver: Hello, Mr. Speaker.

The Chair: Is it snowing in Calgary?

Mr. McIver: Bright and sunny and, no, not a cloud in the sky.

The Chair: Well, the bananas are ripening up here, Mr. McIver.

Mr. McIver: A beautiful thing.

The Chair: I would ask that members and staff around the table introduce themselves. My name is Bob Wanner. I'm the chair of this committee.

Mrs. Sawchuk: Karen Sawchuk, committee clerk.

Cortes-Vargas: Estefania Cortes-Vargas, MLA for Strathcona-Sherwood Park.

Ms Sweet: Heather Sweet, MLA for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Nielsen: Chris Nielsen, MLA for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Piquette: Colin Piquette, MLA for Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater.

Mr. Malkinson: Brian Malkinson, MLA for Calgary-Currie, substituting for Stephanie McLean.

Mrs. Schreiner: Kim Schreiner, MLA for Red Deer-North.

Ms Luff: Robyn Luff, MLA for Calgary-East.

Mr. Ellis: Scott Ellis, director and senior financial officer, Legislative Assembly Office.

Mrs. Alenius: Bev Alenius, Speaker's office.

Mr. Cooper: Good afternoon. Nathan Cooper, MLA for the outstanding constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Clark: Good afternoon. Greg Clark, MLA, Calgary-Elbow.

Mr. Reynolds: Rob Reynolds, Law Clerk and director of inter-parliamentary relations.

Mrs. Scarlett: Cheryl Scarlett, Acting Clerk, administration, and director of human resources, IT, and broadcast services.

Ms Dean: Shannon Dean, Acting Clerk, procedure, and Senior Parliamentary Counsel and director of House services.

The Chair: Teleconference folks?

Ms Jabbour: Debbie Jabbour, Peace River.

Mr. Nixon: Jason Nixon, MLA for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre.

Mr. Fildebrandt: Derek Fildebrandt, Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. McIver: Ric McIver, MLA, Calgary-Hays.

The Chair: Thank you, folks, and welcome, everyone.

An agenda has been circulated. Are there any additions or changes to the agenda?

Hearing none, I would ask that a member move that the March 1, 2016, agenda of the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services be adopted as circulated. Member Cortes-Vargas. All those in favour, say aye. Teleconference members? Anyone opposed? Thank you. Motion carries.

I think the primary reason we are here today, hon. members, is a follow-up from the discussion that we had at our last meeting, on February 24, when we reviewed a draft of the Legislative Assembly Office budget based upon those parameters approved by this committee at the February 9 meeting. Those parameters proposed a zero per cent growth in the 2016-17 LAO budget.

The staff, after several discussions, proposed a budget that would in fact decrease the budget by approximately .5 per cent over the 2015-16 approved amount. In the meeting on the 24th as Speaker I indicated that I hoped to work with staff in the coming year to revise the budget format so as to identify business units more clearly, to align the budget with the LAO organizational accountabilities and responsibilities, and to work with staff to attempt to develop some performance measures to assist with the formulation of new policies by the Speaker's office and potentially by this committee.

In addition, I signalled several priorities that I as the Speaker and, indeed, I hope the Assembly might address over the next 12 to 18 months, including but not limited to – and I say them again because they have at least an indirect reference to the budget – a more distinctive and respective recognition of First Nations people in the Assembly culture and practices; engagement and the key word for me is “outreach” to the various regions of our province, including rural and aboriginal communities; renewed efforts to focus on engagement by young people and particularly young women and women in the current Assembly, and I've actually asked Deputy Speaker Debbie Jabbour to lead that initiative; and exploring options for improved access and security-related matters to the Legislature.

At that meeting we reviewed each business unit, and the committee, after considerable discussion, passed two motions asking the LAO staff to provide more information on two business units, House services and visitor services. The February 24 draft, while reflecting a reduction of approved expenditures, redistributed money to address possible additional Assembly hours and the full year's operation of the various components of the new Federal building and the various related visitor services activities in that building and on the precinct. Since last week staff have reviewed the calculations for the two identified business units and submitted for the committee's consideration additional information, which they are prepared to speak to and share today.

In the February 24 draft of the House services budget staff utilized past practice, which has been described as the full-funding formula. That formula was used to estimate the potential number of sessional hours required for the various components that support the House; namely, for security, pages, *Hansard* staff, and others. Additionally, I'm advised that in past years the number of sessional

hours has changed from as much as 80 sessional days estimated. In the year 2015-16 the number used was 70.

I'm also advised that as a result of this past week's review staff determined that the narrative for the parameters that were approved on February 9 included an estimation of 35 hours per week for the House. An incremental increase may be required of up to eight hours per week while session is sitting. I think the narrative of 35 hours was in fact not appropriate, and we ought to focus – and the staff have focused – on the eight hours' principle.

The matter of the management of the volume of hours is a bit of an art form, as I'm learning, to estimate what we as MLAs – how many hours we may be sitting. It's important that if we underestimate that and the hours exceed our estimate, then there are some other decisions that the Assembly would need to make with respect to the necessary money to meet any additional hours.

With respect to the visitor services' budget it's important, and I want to underline to the committee, that we realize that last year's business only allowed for approximately eight to nine months of operation. By the time the place was up and running and staff were put into place, the actual service to the public only began in late August or September. We need to therefore keep in mind that last year's budget was the first budget for the new visitor services centre, so the reliance on historical data was somewhat limited from the past.

1:10

Please also keep in mind – and I want to emphasize this, thus the reason why I said again my hope and priority, which I've heard all members of the House speak to – that this unit has been a success story in terms of its engagement with the general public, the number of people that have continued to join us. After eight months I'm advised by staff that we've actually, in those few months, had a 35 per cent increase in attendance, which we all ought to be proud of. In addition, the volume of space far exceeds what has existed in the past. In actual fact, LAO management did manage the overall budget and did shift resources from underspent areas to sustain the success of this new outreach operation, while at the same time reducing the overall LAO costs in the current budget year.

It is my hope and that of the LAO staff that the Legislative Assembly, this Assembly and this office and my office, serve as an example for others in these difficult economic times that our province is facing. I want to assure the committee and all of the members that I along with the dedicated staff are committed to the highest possible professional standards and we will implement the best possible quality and services based upon the resources that this committee will approve for the operation.

I would ask that as we review the budgets and speak to the details, the questions you had from last week, after that discussion and the specific questions, that the committee then might move to a motion that approves the overall budget. At that time, if we arrive at that point, I have a motion that can be filled in with the amount of money that may or may not be approved.

We do want in visitor services to improve our engagement with our citizens in a new and more significant and innovative engagement in order to strengthen those Westminster democratic traditions that we all believe in.

I would propose that we allow the staff to explain the details and answer further questions from the members with respect to those two motions that were passed on February 24. After all of the necessary information is shared, I would respectfully ask that the committee consider approval of a motion which adjusts a total vote expenditure amount for the 2016-17 year.

With that high overview I would, with your permission, suggest that we allow ourselves, on the first item with respect to House

services – Mr. Ellis, do you have any general remarks, or would you prefer that we address the questions?

Mr. Ellis: I can provide some overview of what we attempted to do in providing the information that was sent to the members.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Basically, we added some additional information to what you had previously seen. Specifically, we added a forecast column for '15-16 and presented our best estimates as to where we're going to be with respect to actual expenditures in this current fiscal period, recognizing that we still have a couple of months of transactions yet to process and that those numbers are a reflection of what we think is going to happen. It could go either way, but that's our best guess at this particular point in time.

We've also provided some information for '14-15 in terms of the actual information. There are, as the Speaker alluded to, limitations with respect to the comparability of the actual information because from year to year, you know, the circumstances change. The noteworthy change that occurred in House services in this particular budget year was the change in the number of hours that the House is sitting in response to the standing orders and practice; actually, what's happening in the House. Those sessional numbers for December have alerted us to the fact that there are increases in the hours that will have an impact going forward if they continue to sit as they have been in December. However, that's something that we always try and take into account.

As the Speaker alluded to, we budget to the maximum such that in the event that these situations occur, where the House sits for a longer duration, we have the resources to adequately support and ensure that the House will continue to function. So, in essence, the democratic process will continue. As it has been our practice in past years, if the resources are not expended to the level that we're anticipating or preparing for, those monies would be returned to the general revenue fund and would not be spent by the Legislative Assembly Office.

Moving down to the bottom of the document, what we basically put forward here is the incremental change from the budget in '15-16 to the budget in '16-17. We communicated to our staff that the determination of these dollars should be based on the eight additional hours per week that session could sit. That's what they've taken and calculated based on the impact of an hour of session on their various entities.

For example, *Hansard* has staff that are in the background recording a lot of things, and for each additional hour of session they incur costs, staff costs primarily, to ensure that all of the wording in the Assembly is recorded in *Hansard*. Similarly, we have security officers that are present throughout the sitting hours, and when there are additional hours, they incur additional costs to provide the security service. We've identified a number of different areas – the security, *Hansard*, and broadcasting as well because that's another item that we do contract for – where costs are incurred based on the number of hours that session is sitting. That, in a nutshell, is the explanation of the variance as a result of the eight additional hours per week of sessional sitting.

We've also identified some other additional security costs. Security staff may be able to speak to it in more detail if you need it. Basically, there have been some increases in terms of the amount of security provided in the Legislature Building itself in response to changes in the building. Those costs are reflected here as well as security costs relative to committee meetings held in this building

and events held in this building where a security presence is required.

At the end of the day, all the incremental costs that reflect the difference between '15-16 and '16-17 are reflected at the bottom of the page.

The Chair: With those key words, that therefore it's under that full costing formula, I would think it would be fair to say – you heard words like “could,” “may,” and “might.” It has been in the past, as I understand it, the practice of the LAO that the sessional calendar was used, and you used the potential, possible maximum. Now, clearly, those numbers have moved around over the years, but that's been their past practice. Those other items around a zero budget, et cetera, were with respect to the unit costs, the salaries, et cetera, but they've continued to use this. As the parameters on February 9 said, they've used that practice this year again.

Any questions of myself or Mr. Ellis? Go ahead, Chris.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just want to express my appreciation for the information that has been brought forward and the breakdowns for us to look at. I just had a couple of things. Just to clarify, under operational expenses, other labour and services: what does that encompass? [interjection] Sorry. On House services.

Mr. Ellis: The lion's share of that cost is the broadcasting services that we contract out for.

Mr. Nielsen: And all the associated labour and everything.

Mr. Ellis: Correct.

1:20

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you.

The only other thing that I have, Mr. Chair, I guess, is that I'm just a little confused based on the first document I got and the second one. We were looking at 612 hours. We're down to 504, but we didn't seem to be able to reduce that overall cost. I guess I just wanted to point that out.

The Chair: Mr. Nielsen, I'll attempt, and Scott can add in case I don't actually reflect – I had the same question as I looked at the numbers. You noticed that in my general comments, though, I said that – and I think it was related more to the narrative – when you have this many people in such a short period of time, the information may not have been communicated as a set rate. It was based on what they estimated to be eight incremental hours. The error may have been made or the transition of information may have been made at the front end where, in fact, it was the estimate of the past. The eight hours has remained consistent in both budgets. Therefore, the dollars didn't change, but the narrative may have misled members, including myself, to suggest that there are 35. I think that under that formula that has been used, it's now probably closer – again, it's a safe number – to about 28 to 29 hours, not 35.

Mr. Nielsen: I think that's just why we were trying to ask questions and get those answers for clarification.

The Chair: Fair question.

Mr. Ellis, is there anything else you'd like to add to that?

Mr. Ellis: I think that covers it.

The Chair: Are there any other questions? Members of the teleconference, any questions from you?

Hearing none, thank you.

Mr. Piquette: Mr. Speaker, are we moving on to visitor services, or are you asking if there are any questions, period?

The Chair: No. Just on House services. I'd like to now move to visitor services. I missed the ball last time. I'm not going to miss it this time, Colin.

Now, if we could move to the visitor services discussion, I again just repeat my comments in this area. In this wonderful building, this wonderful room that we're in, there is still a lot of learning and adjustment and, I think, potentially – not only has there been but potentially – some very innovative and exciting opportunities. The data in this case is not as reliable as maybe other parts of the budget because of the short tenure of time that we've had.

Mr. Ellis, do you want to highlight any points about that?

Mr. Ellis: Sure. I can provide a brief explanation. Similar to the House services information that we provided, we've added a forecast column. We've added the actual expenditures in '14-15, and we've also added details in terms of the various differences between the '15-16 and the '16-17 estimates largely due to additional staff that have been required to support the various activities within the visitor centre and within the visitor services programming area. I've identified some of the key activities that have been conducted by visitor services that have generated the increase in the staff requirement. I've also identified the cost benefit associated with that and some other postage and freight costs, other labour services, et cetera, that have all combined to create an increase in the 2016-17 estimates for the visitor services area. I've also highlighted some increases that relate to the gift shop or, as it's called, Alberta Branded. Because of the increase in the size of the operation there – space, staff, et cetera – there are some increases reflected in that particular area as well. So the total of the increase from the '15-16 estimate to '16-17 is approximately \$417,000. What we tried to do is identify the key factors involved in the increase in the costs in those areas.

The Chair: Are there any other questions with respect to visitor services?

My hope and my expectation are that you will begin to see a much more stable pattern. I suspect that this next year will also experience some growth, and I know that staff hope that that includes increased revenue as well. I'm reasonably confident that that will begin to develop, but we're still in the start-up mode. I would hope that a year from now we will have a better, more reliable pattern of both expenses and revenue after a full year of operation.

Are there any other questions with respect to visitor services?

Mr. Piquette: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I have a few comments and questions.

The Chair: Yes. Go ahead.

Mr. Piquette: Thank you. First of all, for the record I'd like to say again that I do appreciate the critical importance of ensuring that Albertans do have access to democratic institutions such as the Alberta Legislature. In fact, if we were, you know, in more fortuitous circumstances, I'd probably be arguing for an expansion of those services. Unfortunately, given the economic realities that the province is facing, I think it's our job to carefully examine every expenditure, even in areas such as this, to make sure that the taxpayer is getting value for their money. I think we have a fiduciary obligation to do that. The questions and motion that I put forward last meeting were in that spirit.

I want to congratulate the Legislative Assembly Office for providing, you know, some much-needed clarification. We appreciate that. I understand the situation a lot better now. I also really appreciate the comments you made in your preamble, Mr. Speaker. That also was very helpful. Part of the misunderstanding we were having at the last meeting was that it wasn't clear to me that the increase in the 2015-2016 budget had been absorbed by other areas of the budget rather than within the visitor services section, so I do appreciate that clarification.

I mean, do I have that correct, Mr. Ellis? Am I characterizing kind of what happened at the last meeting, you know, this present fiscal year correctly, that the increase in visitor services was absorbed by other areas of the budget?

Mr. Ellis: Right. If you're referring to the forecast for the '15-16 expenses for this year, yes, we have had to absorb some increases in that area as a result of moving into the new premises and additional costs that have been driven by visitors coming to the site and wanting to see some of the exhibits that were presented; the Magna Carta, for example. Yes, those costs have been, if you will, absorbed in the organization.

Mr. Piquette: May I ask from what other areas of the budget those costs were absorbed? What other areas were underspent, and how much was absorbed?

The Chair: I'm going to try and answer that one. By the way, I know I speak for staff. They very much appreciated the intent of the questions last week, and they recognize that there were some changes there on a go-forward basis. That's going to be, certainly, a learning tool for me.

The point you emphasized is that we are managing within the other areas. As Mr. Ellis said, though, I think it's fair to say – and this is the way I've approached this, and I'm going to use the first potential opportunity. If the House, all sides of it, the Assembly, does not sit as many hours as they may, as the maximum, then that might be a source that would be used to manage it. The other would be our own individual Assembly offices. The economizing that each of us as MLAs would make is potentially an area that could be provided. Is that a fair description, Shannon?

Ms Dean: Yes.

The Chair: Scott?

Mr. Ellis: I think it is. I think that if we look at the overall Assembly budget, you can see that there have been decreases in multiple areas here, that have basically provided those additional resources. There are various explanations as to why, you know, those amounts had been less than what we had previously anticipated. However, there are numerous examples within the summary document that reflect where those costs were reduced.

Mr. Piquette: Just so we understand this going forward, how are these types of decisions made? Who would be in power in the organization to make the decision to transfer money, you know, from one budget area to the other?

1:30

Mr. Ellis: Typically we don't transfer the budget so much as we allow additional expenditures within that area so we can know what's happening, but the expenditure officers in a particular branch have authority to sign off on expenses. However, if they're not previously budgeted expenditures, they would have to be approved by the Clerk of the Assembly, and the Clerk would keep the Speaker informed about those decisions and the impacts of

them. So there's an approval process that's undertaken within the organization to ensure that we're allocating resources appropriately.

Mr. Piquette: Thank you very much.

I just have one final comment.

The Chair: Yes. Go ahead.

Mr. Piquette: Actually, once again you pre-empted me, Mr. Speaker. I was just going to kind of ask – it seems like there are, you know, maybe some new opportunities to increase revenue through visitor services with our beautiful new facility. I know that I've heard that the second floor is becoming popular for weddings. We've expanded the floor area of the gift services department. Is there ongoing work and thought given to increasing revenue from visitor services so that next year maybe we can see it go down a bit?

The Chair: I could give you a great speech on this, but I'll leave it to Scott.

Mr. Ellis: Well, I think that's our wish going forward as well, that we take advantage of these wonderful facilities that we're in right now and the exposure that we now have. Exposure is a really important factor here because there are a lot more people coming into this building than there were into the pedway, where our previous gift shop was. We have increased exposure, and I think that will equate to greater revenue going forward.

Mr. Piquette: Thank you very much, sir.

The Chair: I would just add to that that I think we have the potential here – I think it's already starting, that we have potentially a destination site rather than a circumstantial site. I think you're going to see people seeing this as a place with Alberta wares, and activities of a number of parts of our regions, including Medicine Hat, will be available in that store.

Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Cooper: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm just wondering if we've considered opening this second-floor space to the opportunity for wedding rentals, that kind of thing. I'm wondering if we've done the same for the sky palace, or perhaps we might consider airbnb that space.

The Chair: I'm sorry; I lost your last comment.

Mr. Cooper: It's all right. I just wasn't sure what other revenue potential we might be able to be willing to drive, perhaps airbnb the sky palace or weddings, receptions, bars, day cares, anything like that.

The Chair: Ms Dean.

Ms Dean: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are developing protocols for that type of arrangement, perhaps not weddings. I think these are items for discussion, perhaps, for the Speaker before we roll out a plan. Right now the facilities are available for members, caucuses, ministers' offices. I think that first we'd like to make the facilities available to the wider GOA family and then roll it out to the public at large, but those are details that we need to sort through with the Speaker.

The Chair: And I would just add that that's part of a more detailed business plan that I think in part is going to be driven by objective but also by experience. I think that's potentially a market where

staff would be coming forward, I think, with a more detailed plan in the future.

Were there any other questions? Somebody on the teleconference?

Mr. McIver: Mr. Speaker, it's Ric McIver.

The Chair: All right, Ric. Did you have a question?

Mr. McIver: Yeah, I did. Just in terms of context on the 11th floor of the building, just so we can kind of think about how much more it could be used, what percentage of the booking time is being used right now for the 11th floor of the Federal building?

The Chair: Mr. Ellis can add to the details. I don't believe that the LAO has control over the 11th floor. Mr. Ellis, is that correct?

Mr. Ellis: That's correct. That's not Legislative Assembly Office space. That is government of Alberta space, and we have no jurisdiction over that 11th floor.

Mr. McIver: Okay. So at what floor do you start to enter jurisdiction? The 10th? The ninth? The eighth?

Mr. Ellis: We have from the main floor up to six.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Everything above that is government, and it's in a different budget, then?

Mr. Ellis: Correct.

Mr. McIver: All right. Okay. That answers my question. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Are there any other questions on the visitor services area?

Hearing none, I'm hoping that someone might move – and I'm going to suggest what that wording might be, assuming that there seems to be an agreement that the new information has helped make a final decision for the members . . .

Cortes-Vargas: Sorry. Can I just make a comment?

The Chair: Yes. Go ahead.

Cortes-Vargas: I think I just wanted to take a moment to appreciate the efforts of the LAO staff for the updated numbers. We were asking for more details, and I believe we did get that, the reason being that in these economic times it's important that as Members' Services Committee members we lead by example and ensure that the Legislature and the Legislative Assembly Office exercise the appropriate fiscal restraint and that we ensure transparency and accountability. The government of Alberta and Alberta families are all doing the same thing. They're making hard decisions. They're looking at every penny, and that's what our committee members are prepared to do.

Last meeting we simply asked for more information to provide clarity around these two budgets, and from the questions that we were able to ask today and from the information that we received, we were able to get more clarity as to where those budget allocations were happening. In the context of every other LAO branch holding their line, we asked, you know: where are these additional cost savings? We think that's a fair line of questioning.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Malkinson. Did you have other comments, Member?

Mr. Malkinson: Yeah. Just to follow up with what my colleague said and sort of, you know, a thought that came out of the conversation we had here is that, Mr. Speaker, as you mentioned yourself, going forward, especially on the visitor services in particular, we're going to be seeing more details as we haven't had a chance to see what the costs would be on that particular budget item. As we've chatted about, I think there has been a desire going forward for details on the budget so that we as members of this committee can look at what the LAO is doing and be able to make an informed approval of the budget.

One thing I would recommend is that going forward, when we have our next meeting, which most likely would be in the next couple of months or so, I think it would be worth while to consider the possibility of maybe having a mid-year fiscal update at some point down the road. I'm not willing to make a motion to that effect at the moment; I'm just, you know, mentioning to the staff and the LAO here that I think that might be something worth while, especially coming out of the I think very useful conversation we've had here regarding the details and not having a particularly good previous year to compare it to. I think that that would be useful.

The Chair: Thank you. I can tell you that those kinds of meetings, I think, even if it's just for presentations and information and dialogue – my expectation is that we might be meeting more frequently as a Members' Services Committee than we have in the past, discussing and being informed about those kinds of matters such as the one you've just cited. Thank you for that.

Mr. Malkinson: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate the opportunity. I just wanted to make a couple of brief comments in light of some of the comments. I appreciate that the government members now have the information that they were hoping for initially and that the time to review that information was of critical importance. I would hope that, now that they have a real sense of the importance of time when it comes to important budgetary decisions, they would encourage the Minister of Finance to allow the opposition into the budget lockup at the same time as the media so that they would have an equal opportunity and more time to study that. I'm sure that my colleague in the Alberta Party – some might call him the independent Member for Calgary-Elbow – would also appreciate some additional time to review these sorts of important documents.

1:40

I also trust and have a new appreciation that every minister will be looking at their own office in the same sort of detail and providing reductions. I also hope that when we debate the interim supply, that we can all expect early next week, there would be this much detail provided for what will likely be a significantly larger amount of money.

I do also want to thank the staff for providing great additional information. I also thank them for their efforts to ensure that the overall budget, as we asked in our initial meeting, was a zero increase or less, which is exactly what they provided for us. I appreciate the difficult work that it took to get us there. Certainly, myself and, I would expect, colleagues of mine that are also here will be happy to support the overall efforts of the LAO in providing no increases in their overall budget.

The Chair: Are there any other questions or comments?

Hearing none, I am hoping that there is a member who might be prepared to move that

the 2016-17 Legislative Assembly budget estimates be approved in the total amount of \$67,897,000 as submitted. That's the wording I have. Correct?

Cortes-Vargas: I can move that motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Member Cortes-Vargas. Is there any further discussion on this matter?

Mr. McIver: Just ever so briefly to thank the staff for coming in with a budget reduction. While it's not a big number on the reduction, I appreciate that the staff is dealing with a whole bunch of new space and a whole bunch of new circumstances and a whole bunch of new standing orders, which will probably drive costs up. So under those pressures I think it's reasonable to thank the staff for the good efforts they've made to contain things on behalf of Albertans.

The Chair: Thank you very much on their behalf. I appreciate that. Any further discussion? All in favour, say aye. Any opposed? I hear that there are none opposed. The motion is carried unanimously. Thank you.

We move to the agenda item temporary residence allowance. With permission of the committee, this was dealt with by the committee on February 9, where LAO officials were asked to provide the committee with options respecting the temporary residence program. With the committee's and Mr. Clark's permission, I'd like Mr. Ellis to quickly walk you through the substance of the briefing note that was provided by staff, and then, Mr. Clark, I would probably give you the opportunity to comment after that.

Scott, would you like to proceed?

Mr. Ellis: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The document that's before you took some time and effort, and we tried to listen very closely to what we were hearing from members in regard to this particular allowance. Our stated objectives, as are outlined here, were

To facilitate eligible Members claiming an accommodation allowance that is reflective of the actual accommodation costs incurred.

That was front and centre to us.

To not change the current maximum allowable claim amounts.

We have not changed that. It still remains at the maximum level that it has been at.

To avoid any additional administration costs [associated with] the review, processing, and reporting of [actual receipts submitted with] accommodation allowance claims.

That's something we also wanted to avoid. We want to be seen to be not increasing any administrative costs in this particular fiscal environment.

We also wanted to provide some transparency, and we do this regularly, at any rate, with the accommodation claims information that is published on our electronic distribution reports for the members, basically outlining the expenses that are processed on behalf of members.

In meeting these objectives, we basically looked at three options. The first option was the status quo option, and clearly there was, you know, some feedback on that, that it wasn't quite what the members were looking for.

I also heard a wish to deal with actual expenses, and we had another option, labelled option 3 in this particular document, where we considered the possibility of having actual receipts submitted for accommodation allowance claims. The main prohibitive factor in not accepting that particular option or not recommending that particular option was the additional administrative costs that we associated with doing so.

Based on that, we went to an option that we thought would address some of the concerns expressed with the current system and avoid the administrative costs in option 3 and come to an option that would satisfy both of those requirements; thus, we settled on option 2. We have outlined some additional guidelines that we would be proposing to put in place, that would provide greater explanation and clarity with respect to the allowance claims themselves and the process for claiming them, which we think will be of tremendous benefit to members in processing their claims and understanding what it is that we're actually trying to accomplish at the end of the day.

That, in a nutshell, is what we presented in a document that, I believe, you have in front of you. I'll turn it back to the chair.

Mr. Clark: To be brief, this is exactly what I was hoping for in looking at this option, and I really want to thank Mr. Ellis and all the LAO staff for the work that you've gone through to come up with these thoughtful recommendations and all of the options.

I think that option 2, as you've said here – and I do have one brief question – strikes the right balance between transparency, which I know we all believe is important, but also allows for a transparent and legitimate way of claiming actual costs and at the same time doing so without a tremendous amount of administrative overhead. I think that it does strike exactly that. I think it's exactly what Albertans would expect of all of us as members and what we ought to expect of all of Alberta's public service, to think a little differently about how we can address some of the challenges that we have and make sure that we're always doing the right thing by Albertans, who have entrusted us with the management of this province.

I do very much appreciate the work that's gone into this, and I recognize that it was not – what seems like a trivial matter for us may not actually be quite such a trivial matter when you dig into the details of it, so I do very much appreciate that.

Just so I'm very clear, as I read the recommendation, it recommends that “the Members' Allowances Order be amended to allow Members to claim . . . up to the current accommodation allowance.” Now, that's pretty much exactly how I saw section 6(1) being changed. Is that, then, your recommendation, that we do in fact amend the order itself?

1:50

Mr. Ellis: That's correct, yes.

Mr. Clark: So adding those words, “up to,” then, would enable this, as you've laid out here in option 2?

The Chair: Mr. Reynolds, would you like to comment on that?

Mr. Reynolds: No. Mr. Ellis, I could chime in afterwards.

Mr. Ellis: Basically, the wording may not be exactly as you've just stated, “up to”; however, I think the intent and the reality of the order change reflect exactly that.

Mr. Cooper: Once they're finished whatever interaction they need to have, I just have a question for some clarification's sake.

Mr. Reynolds: Mr. Chair, if I may address Mr. Clark's point, I would think that if one were drafting a motion to amend the orders based on option 2, the question would be whether the amendment would, just as you said, say, “up to a maximum amount of” or whether it would say, “reflecting the actual costs incurred up to a maximum amount of.”

Mr. Clark: Right.

Mr. Reynolds: Yes. Mr. Chair, that's my point. Sorry.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Clark: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Yeah. I'm certainly open to whatever language needs to be there to enable it. I think what I like about the implementation piece, if we look at the very last page of this document, is that the LAO would come up with a set of guidelines that would, I suppose, enact the spirit of the actual wording in the member allowances order.

I guess that then leads to my next question: what are the mechanics, then, of actually making this happen? Mr. Chair, if Mr. Ellis could just speak to what next steps need to be taken by this committee to actually make this happen.

Mr. Ellis: Well, the guidelines need to be drafted. I think we've got a good start on that based on the information that we've provided in the briefing note, and we would undertake to do that fairly quickly as well as some minor tweaking in terms of the report structure in the electronic disclosure reporting to reflect dollars as well as days. So there are some minor tweaks that have to be done in terms of the reporting side and the development of the guidelines, but we think that we can accomplish that and are recommending that we would implement the order effective April 1, 2016, and have the guidelines ready at that particular point in time.

The Chair: Are there other members who have questions and comments? Mr. Clark, are you finished? One more?

Mr. Clark: Just one final question, then. The member allowances order itself. I assume that it needs to be amended. This committee, I believe, is ultimately responsible for doing so. Not being a member of this committee, I can't make that motion, so I would have to work with someone who is a member to do so. Perhaps, Mr. Chair, Mr. Reynolds or Mr. Ellis could give some insight as to exactly how that happens or if, perhaps, that could be something that's a take-away from this meeting, to actually draft that amendment.

The Chair: There would be a motion that I would be prepared for someone to move. In fact, I have some potential wording on it.

Mr. Reynolds: Well, that's correct, Mr. Chair. The normal way that this would proceed would be to have a member make a motion that would in fact amend the order. We've thought about that, and in addition to what we were discussing in one clause, the other one would be that you'd have to amend it to take away the provision that says, "not to exceed 120 days in a fiscal year," because you would not be making it on days; it would be on total amounts. The total amount that's found in section 6 would exist. I mean, it says that it's subject to the maximum amount of \$23,160, I believe, so that maximum would apply to what you could claim. It would just mean that if you're claiming less than \$193, you could claim more than 120 days, I mean, however that works out, if you understand what I'm saying.

Mr. Clark: I know exactly what you mean now.

Mr. Reynolds: The number of days in the order wouldn't make any sense then, so that would have to be taken out.

Then I think the only other piece of the puzzle that would remain would be that the order not take effect till April 1, 2016, because as Mr. Ellis pointed out, there would be a need to adjust, you know, the administration to set up the system to get this going and also to prepare the guidelines that would be necessary for the members to claim under this revised order.

The Chair: Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Mr. Chair. A couple of questions. You know, I'm certainly willing to propose a motion that gets us in the direction that we need to head. Just a couple of quick questions, though, in light of Mr. Reynolds' comments immediately prior. Given that it's one giant lump sum, essentially, of \$23,160, do we run any risks of this being in actual fact or perceived as an expense account that MLAs may then have access to?

Does this committee need to approve the guidelines that would be developed by the LAO in terms of what would be an allowable expense and what wouldn't be: for example, Internet in the temporary capital residence, yes, but cable, no, that sort of thing, snow removal, lawn care? Does the committee actually do the approving, or is it just on the recommendation of the LAO?

Given the fact that it seems to me like there might be some to and fro, is April 1 a realistic timeline given that we're going to walk into a couple weeks of session and that it's only, whatever, 30 days away, et cetera?

The Chair: I'll attempt to answer the last question. Actually, one of the questions that I asked Scott and his staff about: can we deliver in terms of the implementation strategy? Mr. Ellis has assured me that he believes we could.

With respect – staff can add more detail – to the first question you had, we all have responsibility, first of all, to the legal and moral aspects of the Legislature's requirements. But there are also some CRA guidelines that we're all required – and we need to have evidence that would demonstrate what we're using that allowance for.

Am I correct with regard to that, Mr. Ellis?

Mr. Ellis: That's correct, yeah. We also have expenditure guidelines that we prepare regularly and provide to members in regard to caucus expenditure guidelines and MLA expenditure guidelines, so it's something that exists already out there. We have from time to time presented those documents to members, and I believe they've thus far been disseminated from the Speaker himself directly to members, and I think that's the guise under which we would propose distributing the guidelines with respect to this temporary allowance as well. So the order would be stating the overall parameters of what we want to put in place, and the guidelines would be something that would follow and be distributed by the Speaker, you know, at the appropriate time.

The Chair: To that point I would just draw to the attention of members that this document is just one of the many that's available.

Ms Luff: I just wanted to say that from the beginning I, you know, fully supported the intention of this motion, and I just wanted to thank the member for bringing it forward, and I also just wanted to thank the LAO for coming forward with the options based on the discussion that we had at the meeting a couple of weeks ago. I just wanted to say that I think I also support option 2. I've had some discussions with the member opposite, and it represents the original intent of his motion.

You know, I think we also would like to have some guidelines around what this can be used for. That was part of what we asked for originally in terms of ensuring transparency for the public so that the public knows what the money is being used for, which is why we did originally ask for some ideas around receipting.

2:00

You know, going forward, if something were to happen that would allow receipting to be more affordable and less onerous, then

that's something that maybe we want to look at in the future, but given that at this time it appears that it would cost a significant amount more, I'm happy going with option 2. But, yeah, we also want to make sure that there are some appropriate guidelines for how that gets rolled out. I guess maybe I'd just ask if the LAO – you said that you had, potentially, a motion that would . . .

The Chair: Yes. I've got a proposal that would, I think, meet both questions.

Ms Luff: Meet both questions?

The Chair: Yeah.

But before I go to that, I'm wondering if there are any other questions that members here or on teleconference might have.

Mr. Reynolds can add to it, but the motion would be that Section 6(1) of the members' allowances order be amended (a) by striking out "in the amount of" and substituting "reflecting the actual costs incurred up to a maximum amount of," and (b) in clause (a) by striking out "(not to exceed 120 days in a fiscal year) on which." The amended order, as Mr. Reynolds said earlier, would take effect April 1, and Mr. Ellis feels confident that we can deliver on that.

Ms Luff: Okay. Well, I'd be willing to move that motion.

The Chair: Sure.

Are there any other questions?

Would you like to hear the motion again?

Mr. McIver: Yes, please.

Mrs. Sawchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The motion is by Ms Luff, that

Section 6(1) of the members' allowances order be amended

(a) by striking out "in the amount of" and substituting "reflecting the actual costs incurred up to a maximum amount of," and

(b) in clause (a) by striking out "(not to exceed 120 days in a fiscal year) on which."

And the second part of that would be that

the amended order take effect on April 1, 2016.

The Chair: Having heard the motion, are there any questions or comments?

Mr. Clark: Just very briefly, again, I know I've expressed my thanks to Mr. Ellis and the administration and Mr. Reynolds for your help, and also to my fellow colleagues on this committee and all members. It's been a bit of a journey to get here, but I very much appreciate your willingness to work together on this.

Mr. Speaker, as well I want to acknowledge you for your help and guidance along the way. It's one of the first things – it might be the very first thing that I wrote to you about, in fact, back in July. It might have even been before then. I appreciate it, and let's hope as we prepare to get into the next sitting of the Legislature, a week today, that this spirit of collaboration and co-operation carries through. One can but hope.

I do very much appreciate it. I think we've done a good thing here today, so thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. Again, my apologies, and thank you for your patience on getting this matter brought forward.

Mrs. Schreiner: Mr. Chair, I as well would like to say that I support the intention of this motion, and I'd like to thank the LAO for all their hard work to bring the options forward to this committee. Given the projected increases in the administration costs and

Alberta's economic times, I agree that this option, option 2, is a good option. It's supporting transparency, and it's what Albertans are looking for.

Thank you.

The Chair: Hearing no further comments or questions, all in favour of the motion, please say aye. Teleconference? Any opposed? None opposed. The motion is carried unanimously.

The next item on the agenda is unproclaimed amendments to the Legislative Assembly Act. Just some general comments based upon what's been provided to me. Mr. Reynolds will clearly need to speak in greater detail or to questions you might have. This item of business arises because apparently there was an amendment to section 38 of the Legislative Assembly Act passed in 2001 that was never proclaimed into force. The amendment concerns the process for dealing with long-term disability benefits for members. There is a briefing note on the subject prepared by Parliamentary Counsel that was posted on the internal website last Friday.

During the last Legislature the Statutes Repeal Act was passed, and it requires that the Minister of Justice table a report listing all of the legislative provisions passed prior to January 1, 2011, that have not been proclaimed into force by December 31, 2016. Legislation on this list is automatically repealed unless the legislation is proclaimed in 2016 or the Assembly passes a motion that the legislation not be repealed.

Mr. Cooper, I want to thank you for the family-friendly activity that you've had in the meeting today.

Mr. Cooper: I'll be right back.

The Chair: For those of you who are not watching, Mr. Cooper had his family with us today. That's good. This room needs more children.

The Minister of Justice has written, asking if the committee would be prepared to take any action on this item. If nothing is done, then the legislation will be automatically repealed at the end of 2016.

Do you have any questions that Mr. Reynolds would be able to speak to?

Mr. Reynolds, do you have some comments?

Mr. Reynolds: As much as I'm sure everyone would enjoy an enlarged discussion of this item, I would just like to reiterate what you said. There was an amendment passed in 2001 to the Legislative Assembly Act concerning the process for members applying for long-term disability benefits. Speaker Kowalski indicated at the time in Members' Services that to his knowledge no member had actually ever applied for long-term disability. Frankly, I don't think that situation has changed in the past 15 years. The act was passed because all acts receive royal assent, but not all acts come into force on royal assent. So this one was awaiting proclamation. It was never proclaimed, and it's been 15 years.

Now with the Statutes Repeal Act it's kind of that if it's that old, it's going to be repealed automatically at the end of this year, 2016, unless someone does something like introduce a motion in the Assembly. Our recommendation, if you want to discuss it, is basically that the committee recommend to do nothing, and it would be repealed. You know, it's difficult to reconstruct why they wanted to do this in 2001. I'm not sure that whatever reason it was exists today. Members still have LTDI protection pursuant to regulation. As I said, if you do nothing, it will just be repealed. But if Members' Services wants to revisit this issue at a different time, I would say just take the initiative and start afresh.

Those are my submissions, Mr. Speaker, unless people want to hear more on it.

2:10

The Chair: Are there any questions?

Just some clarification for me, Mr. Reynolds. Do we actually need a motion on this item, or did the minutes reflect acceptance of the agreement? What's your advice?

Mr. Reynolds: Well, really, Mr. Speaker, it's true that you could have a motion, but the wonderful thing about doing nothing is that you can actually just do nothing and that would suffice.

Mr. Cooper: Chair, I would certainly prefer that we don't pass a motion that says that we will do nothing.

The Chair: That might be interpreted in different quarters in a different way than intended here today.

Thank you for your advice and recommendation. The minutes and *Hansard* will note the report and act accordingly.

We are about to, all of us, go into a very busy time over the next several months. As I tried to indicate in my opening remarks, it is my hope that this committee might meet more frequently than it has in the past. There might be some issues that are still outstanding,

but not very many. I'd like an opportunity to consult with others and with staff about matters that might be coming up. With your agreement I would ask that the notes reflect that the meeting be at the call of the chair. Any members that have some matters that they think they would like to address, please let the Speaker's office know, if that's agreeable.

Are there any other items, questions, matters today for staff, members?

Thank you today for your co-operation. On behalf of the staff and myself we appreciate the support you've provided.

Mr. Cooper, did you have something else to say? He just wants to move adjournment.

Mr. Cooper: Motion to adjourn.

The Chair: I know him, you see. Thank you very much.

The motion – they're already halfway out of the room. All in favour of the motion to adjourn? Are there any opposed? I did not hear a no.

[The committee adjourned at 2:12 p.m.]

