

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: Tuesday, August 20, 1996 **8:00 p.m.**
 Date: 96/08/20
 [Mr. Clegg in the Chair]

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Please be seated.

head: **Government Motions**
Recess

24. Mr. Evans moved on behalf of Mr. Day:
 Be it resolved that when the Assembly adjourns to recess the current sitting of the Fourth Session of the 23rd Legislature, it shall stand adjourned until a time and date as determined by the Speaker after consultation with the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

[Motion carried]

MR. EVANS: Mr. Speaker, I would now ask for unanimous consent of the Assembly to waive Standing Order 38(1) in order to make a few changes to committees. The changes have been circulated, and I hope that hon. members will accede to that request.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Does the House give unanimous consent to waive the Standing Order? All in favour, please say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed, if any? Carried.
 Hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Committee Membership

25. Mr. Evans moved on behalf of Mr. Day:
 Be it resolved that the following changes to the following committees be approved by the Assembly: on the Select Standing Committee on Law and Regulations that Mrs. Balsillie replace Mr. Zariwny and on the Select Standing Committee on Private Bills that Mrs. Balsillie replace Dr. Nicol.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: All those in favour of the motion by the hon. Deputy Government House Leader, please say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed, if any? Carried unanimously.

head: **Committee of Supply**
 [Mr. Clegg in the Chair]

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I'd like to call the committee together on day 2 of the supplementary estimates. I would ask the hon. Minister of Community Development to make a few opening remarks.

head: **Supplementary Estimates 1996-97**

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Chairman, I would just take the

opportunity to briefly address some of the comments and questions from Edmonton-Whitemud. First, with regard to his suggestion that program changes for seniors be grandfathered, let me say that I'm extremely sensitive to the fact that seniors do live on fixed incomes and have less flexibility to cope with sudden income changes. It is for that reason that we're very carefully monitoring seniors' incomes to assess the impact of programs.

The hon. member would know that we have had an interdepartmental group do a review of changes to seniors' programs and the cumulative impact. The hon. member might also know that I have met with the interagency council, which is a group of all of the seniors' organizations throughout the province, to share with that interagency council . . .

Chairman's Ruling Decorum

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Order, hon. minister. If we could just have a little bit of attention in the House. It's not fair to members speaking . . . [interjections] Order. It's not fair to members speaking or the people that are trying to listen.

Hon. minister, and I'd like a little co-operation.

Debate Continued

MRS. McCLELLAN: As I was saying, hon. members, I have met with the interagency council. I have shared with the interagency council the cumulative impact study that was prepared by the departments. I have not released that study publicly at this time because I did make a commitment to the interagency council that I would like to have their feedback to add to it.

The study that we have now is a draft, and the interagency council has committed to try to get their input back to me by the end of August. However, on some preliminary discussions with them, I think it's fair to say that it may be a week or so into September before we get that feedback. At that time, then, we would be prepared to release their comments. As well, we are waiting for the formal work done by the Seniors Advisory Council to add to that. I think that consultation process, that review of the cumulative impact will be very important to assessing what changes might need to be made to any other areas in the Alberta seniors' benefit program.

We did have a quite widespread public consultation before the program was developed. It's been in place for a period of time now. We learned some things through that cumulative impact study that led us to the reinvestment, which is what we're talking about tonight, the special-needs assistance portion of it. As well, it was identified that seniors who live in lodges or long-term care facilities or subsidized housing do not get any renter's assistance or homeowner's assistance, which was rolled into the seniors' benefits program for those who are homeowners, and we have included an increase for those people in that area.

One of the things I'm pleased to report to you is that we were able to include that without seniors having to apply. They do not have to go through an application process; it is automatic. They begin to get the benefit, which would be from the range of \$220 to \$440. It'll be one of those figures. That automatically happens.

I'm also pleased to tell you that in the short term that the new special-needs assistance program has been in place, the applications have been significant. The approval rate has been much higher. It's at about 55 percent now. The average amount of the grant is significant. It's over \$1,700. A number have been for the full \$5,000, but it is based on need. I think it was important

that seniors who met with an emergency situation had that security, that safety net there for them, and in my discussions with the interagency council and the feedback they're getting from their members, that program is meeting their needs much better under the new design.

So we want to continue to monitor. I think it's extremely important that we do. I think that performance measures are important in this, but I don't think you can decide everything on that. There will be circumstances that will arise because of situations that seniors are in that may cause us to react again. I think the other thing that's really important to remember is that in this program we are trying to deal with the seniors who are most financially vulnerable. We want to make sure that they are indeed the greater beneficiaries.

I guess I have to say that I don't agree with the hon. member that the planning and budgeting processes are on two separate tracks. I think we are trying to work through performance measures. Again I have to remind the hon. member that these things can act as an early warning system, but they can't necessarily be the entire guide in a program when you're dealing with vulnerable seniors.

The guide, I guess, for the continued work in this is that we work with the interagency council, we complete that work on that cumulative impact study, take that feedback and provide the report, which, as I said, we will make public as soon as we have that completed. I will say, however, that the hon. member's point is well taken. I can assure you that we are working towards refining and integrating our budgeting and planning processes.

Again, I have to say that I'm not sure we'll ever be able to solely rely on performance measures to determine expenditures in this area, because I think we have to have that flexibility to react when it's necessary. I gave an example in the House today. If a senior's furnace blows up, it's 40 below, and it's Friday afternoon, what do they do? Today they can go to the special-needs program. They can get assistance immediately.

Another one that I think, hon. members, we forget about is that they may have to place their spouse in a long-term care facility for just three months, or they may have to go in themselves. Well, they still have all the costs of their home as well as the costs of being in that care facility at the same time. This program can react to that, does react to that, and that was another thing that was pointed out to us.

8:10

So I hope that members will look favourably on the expenditures that we are asking for in this. I think they're important to seniors.

I certainly would be prepared to answer any other questions in this area. Thank you.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

MR. WICKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just want to speak briefly on two items in the . . .

Chairman's Ruling Decorum

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Order. Could I have some order. Hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs, would you take that outside until you learn how to operate it, please. Take the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood with you too.

Well, okay. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Debate Continued

MR. WICKMAN: I just want to touch on two items in the estimates very briefly. They're both directed to the same minister, one in her former capacity and one in her present capacity. I want to speak briefly about health. There is a concern as to whether there is a decline in health. In my opinion there is. In the opinion of my neighbours, in the opinion of my constituents, in the opinion of people I talk to, there is a decline. People are frightened. People are uncertain as to what's going to happen.

Now, going through my constituency files and looking at the number of case studies that have come forward, there have been numerous case studies that have come forward, Mr. Chairman. Most of them, with the co-operation of the office of the former minister, I've been able to resolve. So those particular ones have worked out. I have sat down, and I have corresponded, and by in large in most cases those ones have been resolved. The difficulty, of course, is the people, the constituents that don't approach me, that don't have an advocate, that don't have someone to go to. Those are the ones I become concerned about.

As you go throughout this province, increasingly people are saying that the health care system is going awfully and that it has to be addressed. Now, we're talking in terms of a band-aid here that we're going to apply. Is that going to help it? No. I think we go back to the original problem. When the whole restructuring took place, there really wasn't a sufficient plan in place that was going to address the implications of the downfall. So the government has to recognize it, and they will recognize it eventually. Albertans are saying more and more so that there is a problem in health care, and they want that addressed.

The other one that I go through in my constituency – the top three priorities, let's put it that way. Health is one. Second is education, which doesn't apply because that's not covered under the estimates tonight. The third is the issue of seniors, which is covered under Community Development.

Mr. Chairman, through you to the minister, seniors feel that they've been disadvantaged. On a percentage basis they have by far lost more in terms of programs and benefits than any other sector of the population. Seniors feel that they have been pioneers in this province, that they have contributed a great deal, and now that it's their turn to benefit somewhat by programs that have been there, that they have assisted in paying for over the years, suddenly they're being decreased, eliminated, and such.

So, Mr. Chairman, I'm going to conclude by just saying that of the three priorities the two that we're speaking of tonight are of serious concern. They have to be addressed. We address health care by almost going back to the beginning and starting over with the plan. I guess we address the question of the shortcomings with seniors' programs by allowing for full participation by seniors, restoring some of the programs, restructuring the programs, whatever, but giving back to them that safety net that they felt was there before that is no longer there.

On that note I'll conclude.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to enter debate this evening on the supplementary estimates dealing with Community Development and the seniors' benefit program. I think it's fair to say that it would be difficult to not support a proposal by the minister to enhance an increase in financial assistance under the Alberta seniors' benefit program,

but I would have to concur in the comments by my colleague from Edmonton-Rutherford that it really does appear to be in large measure a band-aid solution. If the entire vote under the Alberta seniors' benefit is \$150.6 million and we're now adding \$6 million, that would be – and I think it's fair to put it in context – less than one-half of 1 percent of the entire vote that's going back in to attempt to alleviate some of the real need of Alberta seniors as they cope in their senior years and as they cope with significant changes to the Alberta seniors' benefit program.

The minister spoke about feedback that has been received, about feedback that she contemplates will be coming as we proceed in reviewing and refining the Alberta seniors' benefit program, but I'm going to assume, Madam Minister, that there was a significant amount of consultation that came to the department through the seniors' hot line. Certainly I know from my own experience in my own constituency that many seniors did make comments about what they felt were the shortcomings in the program and eligibility criteria for the program.

I can recall a specific instance where I attended a seniors' residence, a seniors' lodge in Sherwood Park and was met with some very frustrated and some very angry seniors who were having a great deal of difficulty understanding the whole eligibility criteria basis. The notion that the need has to be “based on unexpected or increased expenses directly related to changes in government programs” was something that was very difficult for seniors to understand and to comprehend. I had to take a great deal of time and try to explain that the need was around that issue. Where they felt that they met the eligibility criteria, we had to go a little further and explain to them how it all tied together.

Now, once they were aware of what the eligibility criteria were and they understood it better, then they were better in having the knowledge and the understanding. There was still some anger because there had been created an expectation that the eligibility requirement was attainable and then the discovery that it wasn't. So there was still this residue of anger and frustration. I guess my point in saying that is that the minister's explanation now in supplementary estimates is that the eligibility criteria will be expanded “so that assistance is no longer limited” to applicants whose need is that. In other words, that's staying, the eligibility criterion in relation to need “based on unexpected or increased expenses directly related to changes in government programs,” but we are going to now expand the eligibility criteria. Some funds are coming back into the special-needs assistance program to deal with that.

Mr. Chairman, if the minister did state it, my apologies for having missed it, but I think what's really important is that seniors have to know exactly what the criteria are. In having this debate this evening and going through a supplementary estimate debate and having recognized the shortfalls in the past, where we saw a lot of anger and frustration and extra hardship that seniors may not have had to endure, let's not make the same mistake twice. If we're expanding the eligibility criteria, let's make darn sure that seniors are very, very clear on what the eligibility criteria are for that particular program.

The other point I would make is that the minister talked about the flexibility in the program and spoke of the flexibility in the program in a positive vein. Now, there are always in flexibility two sides to the coin, because again, if there is an expectation that is built up, if for example the senior discovers over tea that a neighbour was able to get a new furnace on a Friday afternoon in 40 below, does it then create the expectation that under similar

circumstances I'm going to be eligible too and then finding that they're not? So there are always the two sides to the coin on the flexibility issue. You can see it in the positive light, but you can also see it in the negative light, where expectations are created which then further build to the frustration and the anxiety and the extra hardship that need not be incurred if we're very clear on what the eligibility criteria are.

8:20

One of the issues that came up in debate about the entire Alberta seniors' benefit program previously, Mr. Chairman, was the whole discussion about where the income thresholds were going to be. The minister well knows that members on this side of the House felt that the income threshold level was too low. We heard from our constituents that there is certainly sympathy for that position. They agreed with us on that position. Finding where that right level is is obviously a matter of debate and policy and obviously, to some extent, political decisions. I would again leave with the minister that that whole notion of income thresholds really does have to be addressed again. Times do change.

You will in your feedback, in your consultation hear from seniors who can give you very specific and tangible evidence about where their income thresholds are and where the hardships are. It should of course – and I know the minister will do this – be reviewed on an ongoing basis to determine whether the income thresholds are at the appropriate level. I encourage the minister to do that, and I would encourage that the government look at an upward move of that income threshold, because I think that for what I would assume to be relatively small dollars, by bumping that income threshold somewhat, you can do a great deal to alleviate hardship with seniors in the province of Alberta.

I would conclude my comments this evening, Mr. Chairman, by leaving a question with the minister – if the minister has made specific indication to this, I apologize for having missed it – and that is the actual calculation as to how the exact amounts going into the increased cash benefits were decided, the \$3.75 million and the \$2.25 million going into the special-needs assistance program. What was the basis for how those numbers were arrived at for the vote of \$6 million that we are debating this evening?

So, Mr. Chairman, those would be my comments to the minister. I look forward to a reply. I'll turn the floor over to other members.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's my pleasure to speak tonight to the supplementary estimates. I just have a few questions and concerns of a few different ministries in this.

If I may address the \$20 million under the Health budget, I see that most of that money went to the Capital health authority. I guess my question would be to the Minister of Health: what happened with the funding there for WestView? I remember when that lump sum went out and people were talking about it, but certainly I think WestView got shortchanged in that. WestView certainly have been struggling with their budget restraints and per capita are by far the most underfunded health authority in the province. So I'd like to know what indicators there were that sent that \$20 million to Edmonton and virtually nothing to WestView. If it's just the squeaky wheel that gets the money, we can always provide more squeaking from WestView.

There's one other question I had here under ambulance

services, a new appropriation of \$6 million. Can I ask specifically where that went? I'm sorry if it's been stated and I missed it. A good portion of my riding is a rural riding, and virtually in the MD of Sturgeon there is no consistent ambulance service at all. I realize that's a municipal jurisdiction. I guess I'm asking for some sort of leadership from the province, certainly with regard to 911 – maybe that's where that money is going – or at least starting to co-ordinate between all the municipalities a consistent ambulance service.

While speaking to someone out in Sturgeon, he said to me, "Colleen, if you need an ambulance out in Alcomdale, just get in the back of your car and go in." That to me is not an appropriate response when I was asking concerned questions about ambulance service in, for example, Sturgeon. Now, I know that Spruce Grove and St. Albert have excellent ambulance care. A woman needed an ambulance, and she was two miles out of the St. Albert city limits. They wouldn't allow St. Albert to go get her; Morinville had to get her. It was a disaster out there. I guess I'm asking: is there any move toward at least provincial guidelines and expectations? How do we get all the municipalities at about the same level of ambulance care? I don't know if 911 is under Health, but certainly it does hinge upon that. I'm wondering if there is any direction coming from that. How is that \$6 million allotted under the ambulance funding?

One other area I'd like to address is to the minister of transportation. I see that \$13 million was transferred out, \$10 million for disaster recovery. Of course, we all watched and were very concerned about what happened up near Slave Lake with the floods. Now, that's \$3 million somewhere. I'm wondering where that is. Maybe I'm just not seeing it on this page, but if that could be addressed.

It just leads me to express a concern. Right now I'm very pleased to say that Highway 37 in my constituency is being widened from highway 794 to Calahoo. However, truly that road should go all the way on, and I wonder if with these estimates they're looking at that. I've also heard that highway 794 is in the five-year plan, and I don't see if that is coming up or where that's at.

I guess people from rural Alberta look at roads differently than possibly people in the city. For us it's not a luxury to have a shoulder on a highway; for us it is certainly essential and a safety factor. Certainly in my constituency just recently there was a very tragic accident on highway 794, so I would stress once again that when the minister of transportation is looking at the funding allotment, if he would not consider the very serious condition of highway 794 from Highway 16 to Alcomdale.

A question about resource roads, if I may, to the minister of transportation. Where are those resource roads? I guess it's just interest on my part. Where are we developing, and where are these roads going? What kind of resources are we looking at, and which constituencies are they in? What does the resource road vote actually mean? I'd just like some explanation and clarification for myself on that so I can understand why it was transferred out and obviously, I guess, where we're not going with resource roads.

With those few concerns about ambulance care certainly in my riding and the lack of co-ordination across the province, as I see it still, speaking from personal experience in Sturgeon, where I live – those I think probably are my main concerns: ambulance care in Sturgeon and the co-ordination of 911 across the province, which I think would help, and of course the condition of the highways in my riding, certainly highway 794 and Highway 37.

I appreciate the interchange over Highway 16X that is being developed on the Devon highway and certainly the one that was already completed a year ago. Certainly that has helped. I really do appreciate that, because only people using that highway daily from Spruce Grove and from the area realize how dangerous that highway can be without those interchanges. So I appreciate the fact that transportation is not a want; it is most certainly a need.

With those comments, Mr. Chairman, I will wait for responses and listen and possibly have more questions later.

Thank you.

8:30

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to the '96-97 supplementary estimates. I've got a few questions on the dollars being asked for approval to be spent here and then some general comments.

First of all, in Community Development, the Alberta seniors' benefit, the \$6 million that we're taking a look at tonight, I think it's high time that the dollars were being put into these two particular areas. They are just two of many areas we hear about on an ongoing, almost daily basis that require funding in terms of seniors' needs in this province, and I'm sure the minister is very well aware of those areas. My question to her is: why are these the only two areas being addressed at this time?

I know that she did talk about now monitoring seniors' incomes and now dealing with the most financially vulnerable in the system. I'm wondering why they are only a priority at this stage, why they weren't a part of the planning in the initial stages, and why there hasn't been some ongoing method to have dealt with those considerations, because of course we all recognize in this province how important seniors are to us, how fundamental they have been to the growth and the history of this province, and how they built it. We owe it to them to take care of them now as they age and to provide the kinds of services, yes, that they require and, as the chairman would point out, that apply to some people in this Assembly.

It is something that we need to be concerned about here and take as of the utmost importance, as a number one priority, not something that gets concern or is addressed after there's a huge outcry or after thousands of seniors have been hurt or dealt with in a manner that they feel is not appropriate, in a manner that had a great deal of lack of planning in it, in a manner that has jeopardized their lifestyle or their anticipated lifestyle, or in a manner that has no consideration for the kind of hardships that they've undergone in the last three years of this restructuring. I think that's something that needs to be considered more than just the two line items that we see being addressed here. It hasn't been, and the minister I'm sure has got some good reasons for that, and I'm sure that the seniors across this province would like to know what those reasons are.

You know, when you start at my age doing your retirement planning, you base it on the plans of the government and the kinds of projections that you will be expecting to be happening. You expect that if there are going to be changes built into the system, there's going to be some sort of a grandfathering clause put in there so that the changes don't happen to you overnight, so that in your golden years you don't make certain plans and arrangements and then find that they are no longer applicable and that you're now going to be living below the poverty line and be scrambling for dollars to pay for medicines and medical costs that

previously you thought were going to be provided for and that housing is no longer affordable and accessible to you. These are the kinds of issues that we're dealing with on a daily basis in the constituency, and I know the minister is dealing with them too. So I'm wondering how she is addressing how they couldn't have been provided for to some greater extent here, as we come into these supplementary estimates.

We see seniors now on an ongoing basis that just don't understand the forms. There are so many things to apply for. The rules are changing on an ongoing basis. They don't know how to fill out the forms. They don't know how to get answers to them. They don't know how to appeal when the appeal process is there. They're confused by the kind of paperwork and the information that they're being deluded with and just feel that the rules are changing constantly and changing constantly not in their favour. So I'm wondering if the minister would be able to address how those concerns are being taken care of at this time and if we can look forward to some sort of streamlining in the near future.

Moving on to the next item, which is the \$6 million in the ambulance services, I'm wondering if the Minister of Health can address for us how it was that these dollars were not properly budgeted for in the first instance. Again, this speaks to a lack of planning in the department. I see that we're looking at increased utilization of both air ambulance service and ground ambulance services. What's changed since the budget was brought in, in the spring, to require this and that you hadn't anticipated? How is it that we need to have more dollars in particular in here? If you could itemize specifically. You may have addressed this the other day, Mr. Minister, and I'm sorry that I didn't hear those comments. So in the absence of any written documentation at this time, I would certainly like you to review that for us.

Definitely an ambulance service, both air and ground, is needed and necessary throughout this province, and I would think it is a primary concern for the Department of Health. That's why I'm alluding to the lack of planning here, because that is not just a small dollar amount. I think \$6 million is a considerable amount of money, and I'm sure that people, particularly in rural areas, would be concerned to find out how and when that happened.

On to the moneys being transferred out of the construction and operation of the transportation system. Some points of clarification here are all I'm looking for from the Minister of Transportation and Utilities. We'd like a list of what's been postponed or perhaps indefinitely canceled in this area that the \$13 million was going to address. It's I think right that the government is putting the dollars that are required into disaster recovery, but we have an obligation to tell the people in the province what was forgone or postponed as a result of that. As I see, some of the dollars are coming back. I'm sure that some of what you had planned there is simply postponed, but if you could itemize that for us, that would be excellent I think.

When we talk about the supplementary estimates, we still have an additional \$21 million in surplus revenue that hasn't been addressed anywhere in the supplementary estimates. I'm wondering why that surplus hasn't been addressed here. I'm wondering why the Treasurer wouldn't have brought in a new budget, given the kinds of surpluses that we have in the province and given the kinds of concerns that we have in a number of ministries, health care of course being the number one priority, as there were so many dollars slashed. There seems to be such a lack of planning in that department, and daily ongoing new concerns of a very serious nature are being raised not just in this Legislature but in

the communities by all peoples affected in this area – health care workers, users of the system – yet we see very little being addressed on this concern. Certainly just on the basis of Health alone there's enough justification to have brought in an interim budget and addressed the kinds of needs that are here in the province right now, but it isn't just Health that we have to be concerned with at this point of time.

Seniors are feeling equally disadvantaged and disenfranchised. I'm sure that a revised budget in those areas, which didn't just talk about monitoring but actually talked about fixing some of the problems – this certainly would have been a timely place and time to do this. Then certainly we on our side of the House would be able to debate this new budget in a sensible manner. There would be no political grandstanding on either side.

It's the right kind of approach to have taken at a time when we're making such drastic changes throughout the province, and cutting the kinds of program dollars that we're seeing here would have been a responsible approach for the government to have taken. There's nothing wrong with saying that we've got a midcourse adjustment here, that revenues are different than we anticipated, that expenses are different than we anticipated, and that we've faced some crises that weren't previously anticipated. Now, midway through, is the time to rectify them before we have to start talking about the human costs to the people in this province, before we start piling up a deficit in education, which we're starting to see with the kinds of program cuts that have been there, not just in the K to 12 stages but in the advanced education programs available.

We're pricing young people completely out of the education market in this province. We are not providing the kinds of services that are needed to those who don't learn in the same manner as the majority of the people. Be they challenged or be they exceptionally bright students, we're not offering those kinds of opportunities to them. We're not offering the kinds of opportunities to students just on a day-to-day basis in terms of enrollment.

8:40

As we all know, September is just around the corner. Many of us have children who will be going back into the school system, and we all know what that means: lots of dollars up front, huge increases for school fees across the board for everyone in this province just to have your child walk in the door of the school, increased fees for books, increased costs for the kinds of supplies that the parents have to provide at this point in time as opposed to those that used to be provided by the school. You add that to the fees for community programs that they are involved in. You add that to the schools that are now saying that if you want your child to play a sport in school, there's an additional fee for that; to the costs of the clothes, the running shoes, the coats that the parents have to pay for. Who can do that? Who can afford to provide their children with exactly what it is they would wish to and want to? Many people in this province can't. In fact, many parents who are financially disadvantaged at this particular time are very concerned about how they're going to provide anything for their children on September 1, never mind what's going to be the requirement.

Those people have to go and beg the school principal and then the board for a special compensation so that their children can just have the basic, bare minimum supplies, never mind all of the extra and additional items that are required by this system. Nowhere do we see this addressed in these supplementary estimates, and we

could have, Mr. Chairman. We certainly could have seen them addressed here had there been an interim budget brought in.

Those are the kinds of items that could have been addressed in terms of funding to education and exactly what we're establishing as a priority in the province here. Are we putting people first here, or are we putting balancing the budget on the backs of the people first? Clearly I see that as being the primary mandate of this government, and given that kind of a mandate, they're not prepared to bring in a budget because they don't care. I think that is appalling.

We do have an obligation to put the people first here, to put a minimum level of programs and services forward. That means the minimum amount of funding in health care that will not disadvantage people. That's something that hasn't been addressed here. We see people disadvantaged as they are elderly in our system and as they are younger in our system. It's our job particularly to protect those people in this province who aren't here to speak for themselves and who can't speak for themselves. We need to put their priorities first. This was a perfect opportunity to do it, and, Mr. Chairman, the government simply wasn't prepared.

I am hoping that the Provincial Treasurer will address that and will itemize for us why it is that they did not bring in an interim budget at this time and will justify it so that when we go back to our constituencies, we can let the people of Alberta know exactly why the government wasn't prepared to take that concrete kind of action at this point in time.

Thank you.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Chairman, I just thought it might be helpful for members if I went over the process one more time. I know that some of the members may not have heard it, and I'm also sure that members want to put their concerns on the record.

This may not make a difference, but the question was raised by Edmonton-Whitemud – and I did answer it earlier – on the process, and Edmonton-Ellerslie raised the issue of why now and why only those two areas. So I'll just repeat one more time the process that we are in.

The Premier asked the departments who had had changes in those programs to do a review interdepartmentally on the cumulative impact of program changes at the time that we were concentrating on government program changes. We've seen since that we had to expand that to other things because the federal government, for example, has changed programs that have affected seniors. There have been changes in the costs of utilities. Municipal governments have made changes that have had effects on seniors. So you really have to look at all of them.

What we did initially was identify two areas. Edmonton-Rutherford talked about uncertainty, seniors being frightened, and that's a serious issue. The special-needs program takes away a lot of that uncertainty and that feeling of: what happens if something really happens, and how do I deal with it?

The second area of the program, the \$3.75 million that was asked about by Sherwood Park, that and how did we arrive at that figure: that is the portion for this budget year. We know exactly how many seniors live in subsidized housing, in long-term care, and in lodges, so that is automatically increased to theirs. That was identified as an area of need out of the initial study.

The process now is that I met with the interagency council about three weeks ago and had, I would think, about 35, 40 people in the room from all across the province, shared the study with them, said: "Would you please review this study? It is a

draft report from us. We'd like your input before we make a final report." We've also asked the Seniors Advisory Council if they could give us their formal report on this.

From that we will have a final report, which we will make public. That final report will be the basis for any future decision-making on program changes, but we thought it was imperative that we address those two issues initially. So why now? Why those two areas? That's why. We'll wait for the cumulative impact study and address the bigger picture, whether it's income thresholds or whatever comes out of that study. But I do think it's important. You've suggested seniors should have input. I think that if you talk to the president of the Kerby Centre or the president of the Council on Aging or the Society for the Retired and Semi-Retired, they will tell you that they're most appreciative of having that opportunity to review that. Whenever you have a program that is needs based, it becomes complex. We have also asked them, we've shared with them exactly all of the criteria of the program – and it's mind-boggling, I'll admit – and said, "Can you share with us ways of making this simpler?" Every time, for example, that a senior's residence changes, that program changes. So if you move from your home to a lodge or if you move two or three times in the year, that whole thing throws that program out of whack. So we've asked for their advice in that area.

Mr. Chairman, there were some other questions, but I think we can address those. I thought it might be helpful to explain why this amount, why now, and what are the next steps in the process.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Redwater.

MRS. BALSILLIE: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased this evening to be able to ask questions about the supplementary estimates. My first question would be to the hon. Minister of Community Development. As I am new, I would like to ask some questions that have probably been answered before.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Tonight?

MRS. BALSILLIE: Not tonight. No, not tonight. I think that I can remember. I don't have Alzheimer's; okay? I do remember.

I have worked extensively with seniors throughout Alberta, mostly within my constituency. I was part of the lodge program, and I still work very closely with seniors. My concern is, Madam Minister, that when I go to meet with senior citizens and I talk to them about some of the areas that are affecting them, they tell me that they're unable to renew and get new prescriptions, that they can't afford to go and renew their prescriptions. The pharmacists are telling me that seniors on lower incomes are unable to go back to the pharmacy to renew their prescriptions. So the question I'm asking . . . [interjection] Where? Within my constituency, other areas. I would like to know how the criteria of the threshold was established within the seniors' program. That is one of the areas that has been brought up to me several times, that seniors feel that the threshold is too low. Possibly if you could just give me some indication of how it was established.

The other is and I agree with many of my colleagues that seniors are very confused about the paperwork that they have to complete in order to get Alberta benefits. I just wondered how the minister and how Community Development lets seniors know that there are changes to the system. How is that communicated to them? Is there a program or assistance available in each area, because I'm dealing with a rural community. So confusion . . .

Chairman's Ruling Decorum

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: We've had a very quiet evening, which I really appreciate, but it's getting noisier and noisier. This hon. member, it's her first time up speaking in estimates. Let's just be quiet and give the hon. member at least one turn without all the hassle in the House.

MRS. BALSILLIE: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate your concern.

MRS. SOETAERT: It's Mr. Chairman.

MRS. BALSILLIE: Oh, Mr. Chairman. I'm sorry. He wears a different hat. Okay.

8:50 Debate Continued

MRS. BALSILLIE: Those are some of the concerns that I have in regards to seniors' programs.

Also, in relation to the lodge program I visit lodges throughout my constituency and several of the seniors are unsure about the continuation of the lodge program. Now, I know that doesn't come within your ministry, but it does come under Municipal Affairs. That is one question that they've asked me.

My next question is to the Minister of Health in regards to the ambulance service. I just have a question for you, hon. minister, in regards to the moneys that have been allocated for ambulance service. When I travel throughout my constituency and I talk to the different municipal councils, ambulance is always a number one concern. What they want to know is: who will be coordinating the provincial ambulance service? Will this be coming under the regional health authorities? What will happen to the ambulance systems that are already in place? How will the province look at the volunteer ambulance services that are now available in many of the rural communities and are doing an excellent job? So that would be one question, Mr. Minister, that I would have for you in regards to the ambulance service.

The other I would direct to the minister of transportation. In regards to Highway 28 within my constituency, I'd like to know, Mr. Minister: how are the priorities set, and could I please have a list of the priorities set for the department of highways? What was the criteria in making the change and increasing the amount estimated this year for the budget? I'd also like to bring up, as I've said before, Highway 28, which is a major concern within my constituency. I know that it has been slated for some improvements, but I am unaware of exactly what is happening.

MRS. SOETAERT: No shoulders.

MRS. BALSILLIE: No shoulders and it is a very busy highway. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

MR. DICKSON: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd just like to start off by congratulating the Minister of Community Development in her new portfolio. The questions I was going to ask relate specifically to the supplementary estimates for Community Development. I want to make the observation that in the four years that I've been in the Legislature, I've always found this

minister to be consistently knowledgeable in terms of her portfolio area. She brings a kind of pragmatic approach to problem-solving, that I respect a great deal, and she always manages to do this in a way that's both very gracious and courteous to members and, I know, to the people that deal with her in whatever hat she's wearing as a particular minister. So I think that seniors are probably looking forward to dealing with this minister.

Having said that, I'd like to move on and ask some questions relative to the \$6 million that has been earmarked by way of supplementary estimates. Both the minister and I had the privilege last night, Mr. Chairman, of attending an excellent banquet held in Chinatown in the heart of Calgary-Buffalo. This was actually quite an amazing function. It was an event hosted by the Calgary Chinese Elderly Citizens' Association with some corporate commercial sponsorship. They had invited a large number of seniors. In fact, there were almost 700 seniors that were entitled to come for a free meal and some excellent entertainment in terms of music and dance and a senior citizen who is the most incredible martial arts sportsman one might ever expect. There was also representation from Noreen Mahoney, the president of the Kerby Centre, and Chris Masterman of the Golden Age Club. I was thinking to myself when I saw this huge collection of seniors about what changes these people have seen in the last couple of years in terms of government programs and how they might access them, changes to the range of programs that are now part of the Alberta seniors' benefit, changes in terms of the partial deregulation of rent in seniors' complexes and so on. This is of particular interest to me because I think I have one of the largest concentrations of seniors anywhere in the province living in downtown Calgary.

When I look at the supplementary estimates, and I guess even before that, when I first heard the announcement that the government was prepared to commit some additional dollars for the benefit of seniors' programs, I was most interested in seeing how that would break down, how far that benefit would stretch, how many seniors would be benefited from the supplementary estimates. I'm not going to engage in the querying of why now and why not later. I'll simply deal with the fact that this is in front of us now, and clearly there's a demonstrable need.

Now, what I'm trying to do as a representative of a constituency with a large number of seniors is know to what extent these dollars, the \$6 million identified in these estimates, will stretch and whether that's going to be able to address the need that my constituency office hears about on an ongoing if not a daily basis. So my question initially would be to the hon. minister. With the \$3,750,000 increased cash benefits for recipients, what I don't recall seeing in any of the news releases or any of the material that came out preparatory to these supplementary estimates is an indication of how many seniors will be affected by that amount, increased cash benefits. I understood the minister to say a moment ago in response to earlier questions that she has access to very concrete numbers in terms of all of the seniors involved in different kinds of accommodation and so on, so I assume that the same kind of specificity exists relative to the number of seniors who are anticipated to be able to benefit from that \$3,750,000. So I'd be interested in knowing that, and to put it in I guess the most parochial terms, I'd be interested in how many seniors in Calgary would fit within a category where they would be now eligible to benefit from this increased cash benefit.

The special needs assistance program. It's been noted, I think, many times in this Assembly that there were lots of problems with that program. It was very cumbersome to access. Some of the

buildings I have in my constituency, one in particular, Murdoch Manor, has over 400 seniors in the one complex, and the building manager often ends up becoming a business adviser, confidante, travel agent. This woman and her staff provide an enormous range of services to assist this huge concentration of seniors. I know that because you have to fill out a T1 income tax return to be able to then fill out the application for the Alberta seniors' benefit and that a number of these seniors had not filed tax returns before, it was an enormous amount of difficulty and confusion. For many of the seniors in my constituency, hon. minister, English is not their first language. Some of them have come as seniors from other countries with another first language. One of the things we found was just an enormous difficulty with just the most basic kind of function of just filling out the forms and getting the T1 tax return filed and so on, and then from that information being able to fill out the application form.

Then beyond that we had problems in Calgary where you could go in – there was one woman, as I recall, in the special needs office, and seniors would have to wait. These are often people who have some mobility problems. They'd get down to that office and have to wait and wait and sometimes couldn't get the attention of the person working there. Then they'd come to my constituency office. To phone, we'd have to phone Edmonton, because there wasn't a direct phone hook-up to be able to access the worker in the Calgary office.

9:00

Those kinds of problems, Madam Minister, are perhaps not appropriately addressed by a vote, but they're very much part of the package. So in addition to providing more funding, which is clearly necessary, I'm interested in a bit of an update from the minister.

What things have been done to make it easier for seniors in my constituency and every one of the other 82 constituencies to be able to apply for the Alberta seniors' benefit? For those that require special-needs assistance, what steps have been taken in terms of simplifying forms, in terms of the minutiae of that process to make it more accessible, to allow people to be able to get at it if they have a meritorious claim and not fall into what I would think would be the worst possible scenario, having a meritorious senior who is frustrated and effectively denied access to that additional assistance they require and deserve simply because they can't make their way through all the red tape, the hoops, and the hurdles.

[Mr. Herard in the Chair]

So I'm hopeful we can get some explanation and some update from this minister. I'm particularly hopeful that this minister is going to be able to address some of those concerns, because I know that while she's always received lots of criticism from this side in terms of decisions made as head of the Department of Health, I don't think anybody ever lost respect for her as one of the people in this House and one of the ministers who, I think, genuinely listens. I think that in this new portfolio, working with seniors to the extent that she will be, many of us are hopeful that she will be listening and she will be trying to find some solutions to these very practical and very real problems.

That then brings me, I guess, to my other question, hon. minister through the Chair. We're going to expand the eligibility criteria so that more seniors should be able to qualify. I took the minister's comment about doing a consultation with seniors, and of course that's salutary and that's to be applauded. But surely

the people in her department have already done an assessment, and they've determined how many seniors are likely to benefit. When the eligibility criteria are expanded, what are we looking at in terms of the potential pool of seniors who would fall within, to the best of the department's knowledge, those new eligibility criteria? I'd like some information on that.

Once again, to just bring it down to a very concrete measure, I want to know how many of those people who have come into my office over the last year, how many of those seniors who appear to have a meritorious claim – and I wouldn't say everybody that comes into my office has a meritorious claim, but almost everybody has. I'd like to know how many of those people I'm now going to be able to say to with some degree of confidence, "The problems to some extent may have been resolved, and you now should be able to access the special-needs assistance." So I'm sure interested in hearing that kind of clarification from the hon. minister.

I'm a bit unclear in terms of the new criteria. I was looking this afternoon in my office for the government news release that was issued. I assume that there was a news release that came out with the announcement that talked in greater detail, certainly, than we have in the estimates booklet, which is just a skeletal summary. I saw the minister a moment ago, Mr. Chairman, waving a brochure at me. So I think what she's suggesting is that I shouldn't be so lazy; I should go back to my office and dig this thing out from under the pile of paper. I'd like to have that information so that when I go back on Friday to Calgary-Buffalo, I'm able to share that information with my constituency staff and, through them, with those large numbers of seniors who are going to be interested in what's happening further.

I think those are my principal concerns. I've listened while my colleagues have asked penetrating and appropriate questions on each of the other items, and I'm going to be looking forward to sharing those responses when they get them from the hon. Minister of Health. I'll be looking forward particularly to the response from the Minister of Community Development in terms of the kinds of concerns I've just expressed.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I'll take my seat and allow others to engage in the debate.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Chairman, I'll be very brief and try and pick up on Calgary-Buffalo's and Redwater's. I will give the undertaking to members opposite, as I have in the past, that for anything we do not deal with tonight, they will get in a written response, because sometimes you don't have all the information right with you and you want to be accurate.

I'm going to begin with Calgary-Buffalo, and I'm going to agree with the hon. member that we did share a very enjoyable evening. I think the Chinese community should be commended for the honour and respect that they showed to their seniors last night. I know that we were both very appreciative of being a part of that.

I'm going to go on to the amount, the \$3.75 million. I will clarify for hon. members that this is a \$5 million component, but because the seniors' benefit runs from July 1 on, we're looking at a portion of the year. It is some 33,000 seniors that will benefit by that increase to the cash benefit side. Hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, I've made a note for my staff to send you over some extra copies of the news release. I'm sure they'll do that tomorrow. We do know how many people live in those circumstances, and we're able to gauge the amount of dollars that would be needed to respond to that.

The special-needs program, as you know, had a million dollars in it. The criteria were quite tight. With the expanded criteria, with the experience that we've had with this program to understand the types of areas that were brought to us, we felt that the additional \$3 million, which brings it to \$4 million in a complete year, will manage that. We're monitoring it, as I explained. The average today is about \$1,700 a claim. Remember that we also greatly expanded the amount that's allowed under there. It used to be \$500 for a single person, \$1,000 for a couple; now it is \$5,000, single or couple. We still believe that that is the right amount. We'll be monitoring that.

We have to be careful with the criteria. You don't want to build so much inflexibility into it that you list every circumstance, because I can tell you, a new one will come at you, and it will be as important and urgent to that senior as the ones that we did list. What we have said is that it must be an unexpected or emergent situation. Now, you would know that we have a pretty good idea of the cash flow of seniors from the information we have, and we judge that this is the amount of money that could be needed to manage that.

One thing that every member has brought up is the matter of communication, and I share the same concern that members do in this room. There is a 1-800 number to Community Development for seniors. There is a 1-800 number to the Seniors Advisory Council for seniors. There is a 1-800 or whatever the number is for federal programs for seniors. I have suggested that we have one 1-800 number for seniors.

Shortly after I had this discussion, I met with the federal minister, the Hon. David Dingwall, who is responsible for seniors, raised this with him, explained to him that the federal number is not warmly received by seniors. It's not a very comfortable thing. I haven't called in, but I should try it. If you want this, press 1; if you want this, press 2: you know how frustrated we get when we have those. I have suggested: would they be interested in joining with us and having one information line for seniors? They're very interested. I believe that that will improve the communications.

9:10

I also had the opportunity to be present at the opening of the expanded office in Lethbridge. We're expanding our storefronts. You'll see improvement in Calgary; you'll see improvement in Edmonton and all our regional offices. There's one thing that none of us have talked about tonight, and that is the importance of privacy for these seniors when they discuss their concerns. They deserve the opportunity to maintain their dignity when they are discussing their financial and personal concerns. So we are ensuring that that is there. We're utilizing as much staff as we possibly can to expedite their concerns when they come in. I can assure you that Community Development staff have been instructed to treat every senior with dignity, with compassion, and as expeditiously as possible. I think we have to do a better job of communicating with seniors. I think that's one way.

I remind you and I'll inform the Member for Redwater of the seniors' program booklet. That is well received by seniors. It's widely distributed. If you don't have a copy, we'll get one to you. The Seniors Advisory Council has been very helpful with that booklet. It's a compilation of all of our departments: Health, Municipal Affairs. In fact federal programs are included in that as well.

So communication is a priority. Treating seniors with dignity, with compassion is a priority. Make these programs user friendly. As has been pointed out, it is not always that our

seniors find English is their first language. We try to accommodate that as much as we can too. We're going to just keep working. I think that with your assistance and your advice and suggestions, we're going to make these programs even better.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Roper.

MR. CHADI: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I only have a couple of comments to make with respect to the supplementary estimates today. I'm encouraged to hear the Minister of Community Development speaking on the seniors' issues, speaking with such emotion and heart. I believe that she's going to be quite an asset to her portfolio as the Minister of Community Development. For the first time, Madam Minister, allow me to put on the record that I congratulate you on your new portfolio.

The minister did mention, though, that at times seniors have difficulty in identifying how to access some of the programs, and I'm encouraged when I hear the minister say that a 1-800 number that everyone would know, something that would be advertised, something that wouldn't have an electronic menu – you know, you've got to press 1 or 2. You've got to listen to all the things and then forget when you're at 5 already what 1 was all about. I usually hang up, or I press zero, but if I had a rotary phone, I don't know what I'd do. At that point I'd probably just hang up anyway and call my MLA. In any event, I can assure the minister that that would go an awful long way to putting some of those seniors' fears to rest, to assisting those seniors and those individuals, not only seniors – I can tell you, it would probably assist the MLAs as well – in accessing these programs.

One thing that I'd like to say publicly, too, is that even in my own companies I refuse to have that system on my telephone where you have to have this electronic menu. I refuse to have that. I need to have an individual that can answer the phone and direct the calls. I think that's invaluable, particularly when it comes to business and when it comes to individuals like you expressed that may not understand the English language all that great or might have difficulty with patience and become frustrated rather easily.

Another thing that I think the minister should be aware of from my constituents that have been bringing forward concerns to me, Mr. Chairman, is that we still have difficulty with respect to the threshold that seniors are facing. I would hope that that can be reviewed and will be reviewed in the coming budget. I know that in the supplementary estimates here we find money for different areas, the special-needs assistance program for one and the benefits for accommodation, another \$3,750,000,000 for that program. The threshold really needs to be looked at for the next budget, and I would hope that can be dealt with.

With respect to Transportation and Utilities, it wasn't long ago that we saw the disaster in the Lesser Slave Lake area, particularly on the Driftpile reserve. I note that we're now expending \$10 million.

Chairman's Ruling Decorum

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Hon. members, please. I'm not hearing a word that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Roper is saying, and I know that he's saying some important things. Just keep it down, because it's very loud at the moment. Thank you.

MR. DINNING: And Sine speaks so irregularly too.

MR. CHADI: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. You note that the noise level in this Chamber rose considerably when the Provincial Treasurer came in. I really enjoy having the Provincial Treasurer as a member of our audience. Welcome, Provincial Treasurer.

Debate Continued

MR. CHADI: Transportation and Utilities is an area of concern for him, I'm certain, because \$10 million was taken and expended this year for disaster assistance for Driftpile. I note that the federal government is going to reimburse us, probably in the range of \$7 million. Nonetheless, my question is to the Minister of Transportation and Utilities. I can recall in recent history that the area flooded before, and from news reports that I heard in the last little while, it could very well be up to about two or three different times that this area flooded. There is only one taxpayer; that is, you and I and the people of Alberta and Canada. Whether \$7 million is coming from the feds or not, we still have to look at what do we do about trying to prevent such a disaster, and if in fact we are expending \$10 million this year, how much are we going to expend, if we are at all, to try to prevent a disaster like this? Have we considered looking at spending more money to try to prevent it rather than to continue spending these sorts of funds? So perhaps the minister of transportation will address that after I conclude here.

Mr. Chairman, the big area of concern, of course, is health. No matter where you go in the province, people tell you that health care is a major concern. In my constituency a great number of my constituents call me on a regular basis, and they are concerned with regard to access to certain types of surgery, access to facilities within the Capital health region.

Now, my fears were put somewhat to rest here when the Oberg report came out saying yes, indeed, what we need to do is put more money in. But the one thing that really – and I need to put this on the record: the lack of courage of the author of that report to say that we need money in the Capital health authority right now. The comment that came out – and I remember clearly hearing about it in news reports – is that the author suggested a \$7 million loan. A loan. Now, I'm forever grateful to the government for saying: "No, no, no. It's not a loan that we need. We're going to put the money in. Forget the loan idea." I think that enraged Albertans. It certainly did Edmontonians, and it did me.

I'm not convinced that this amount of money is enough. It's certainly a start. I look at what's happening in terms of the backlog in surgeries, and I heard reports in this Assembly during question period and otherwise, during debate, that surgeries have gone up, in fact have increased over the last year by something like 10 percent. That leads me to believe that there is such a demand for it here in this province. I mean, if it's increased by 10 percent, it means perhaps maybe our population is aging to the point where we have a demand by that much more and perhaps even more than that. So we need to continue to follow the demand and protect those people of this province, protect those people that elected us to do the job.

9:20

Mr. Chairman, Albertans don't have a choice when it comes to health care. We don't have a choice like the Americans do, where they can go to a clinic or they can go anywhere, maybe state to state, and pay for their health care as they see fit. We've got a system of universal health care in Canada. It's not only Albertans that don't have a choice; Canadians don't have a choice.

If I needed hip surgery and I needed it today – it was an urgent situation – I'm out of luck. I have to wait my turn. If I have a house that I can mortgage off so I can go and get a hip replacement, I still can't do that in my own country. I can do it anywhere else probably in the world or most places in the world, but I can't do it in my own country. I have to live within the system, yet I have to live with my pain and I have to live with my suffering. I have to live with my family. I have to live with this thing for probably a year, maybe six months. If I'm lucky, if it's an emergency situation, maybe three months. We don't have a choice. We've got to do something to alleviate the situation. I think six months is too long to wait for heart surgery. I think six to eight months is too long to wait for a hip replacement, particularly if they're in need of it now and they're in pain. I would think that a reasonable system would do it all within maybe six weeks, perhaps two months, eight weeks. That would be reasonable. If this were a corporation that we were dealing with and we needed to clean up the backlog because we're restructuring, we would put some resources in right now to clean up that backlog and bring it to a point where it's manageable. Right now it seems to be out of hand. It's not only the opposition talking about it; it's Albertans. It's all of us. Everybody seems to be talking about it.

I have a great deal of respect for the Minister of Health. I think he brings a certain calm to the portfolio. No disrespect to the previous minister either; I'm just saying that he's a great minister and he'll attempt to do all that he can, and it appears as though there is a softening in the position. I hate using that term because I don't want to take anything away from the restructuring.

All I'm saying is that Albertans have said and continue to say, "Let's clean up the backlog." Mr. Minister, this is one way of doing it. Let's get at it now. We can clean it up. We can bring it to a manageable level, and I think we can do it relatively easily. If we need to expend a little more money, go back to the Provincial Treasurer. Go back to him. I'll help you if you want. We'll squeeze it out of him somehow. We need to have more money in the system, and we need it now. I think what we can do is clean up the backlog. We can bring it to a manageable level, and I know that Albertans would be happy going into the next election. It's not for political purposes that I speak of this. I'm only speaking of this for the suffering and the pain that people in this province are currently feeling, and I know that members opposite hear the same stories as we hear, as I certainly do.

Mr. Chairman, with those comments I hope to have the minister respond and the Minister of Transportation and Utilities answer some of those concerns. Thank you.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I would like to respond briefly to what has been a considerable number of comments and questions with respect to the Health supplementary estimates. First of all, I'd like to respond with respect to the ambulance line, the \$6 million of overexpenditures. If a supplementary estimate could ever be considered good news, I think that in a sense this could be classified that way.

Members will recall that under the previous minister there were a couple of major changes that bear upon this supplementary estimate. One was that there was a tendering or a call for proposals process that was gone through with respect to establishing and improving the air ambulance system in the province. That request for proposals resulted in STARS being the operator as far as rotary aircraft are concerned and also a number of contracts being awarded across the province which put into place

a grid or a network of fixed-wing aircraft to provide service to all parts of the province.

Now, Mr. Chairman, although there are still some things that I think could be improved in the whole area of the dispatch system, that is something that has been worked on, put together. The member of the Assembly for St. Paul is chairman of the committee that's been working closely with those groups. I do think the evidence is there that we do have an improved air ambulance system in the province.

Now, associated with that, the increased ability to call upon air ambulance and the increased capability of the rotary-wing aircraft in terms of range and speed and the ability to be utilized has resulted in a considerable increase in the utilization and the cost of air ambulance. Mr. Chairman, when you consider the nature of air ambulance, being used in emergency situations where timing and a backup team from a specialized hospital are all-important, I think the improved service that we have in that particular area – albeit it still has to be worked on further – is worthy of your consideration, of all members of the Assembly's consideration of this supplementary estimate.

In the area of ground ambulance, which is the smaller portion of the supplementary estimate, we knew quite clearly that there was going to be increased utilization of ambulance services, particularly in the area of transfers. When the nature of a hospital changes – let's say it's converted to long-term care, in a rural area particularly but also in the urban, and acute care services are more centralized in one particular location – we're going to need to utilize ambulances more. That has resulted in an overrun of \$1.2 million, I believe, in the estimates.

It would have been better, yes, Mr. Chairman, to be able to have predicted right on, but it means that there is an ambulance system, a transfer system, an emergency system out there that is working for the public of the province. Yes, the budget that was previously set was under what in fact has been the utilization, but I do not think that we would want that utilization of something as sensitive as ambulances not to be available to the public of the province.

In the course of commenting on the supplementary estimates, Mr. Chairman, a number of people asked about a number of other issues. Many of them are related, without going through the whole list, to an activity which is currently under way. I think all hon. members are aware that there is an ambulance committee or task force chaired by the Member for Lacombe-Stettler. The list of items that has been related here in the Assembly – the issue of governance, whether it should be RHAs or should it remain with the municipal authorities or be under some other model, is one that is certainly under consideration. There's been a draft report prepared in that regard, and responses have been invited to it.

As well, I think the other issues that were listed in the debate have pretty well all been under discussion through that review. We'll be getting the recommendations, and we'll be moving forward to consider those recommendations. I hope that at least in a few key areas we'll be able to certainly take action, because I think this is about the third or fourth ambulance review. I was part of one called the Schumacher report back a number of years ago. Some things were done in follow up to those reports, but there are still some outstanding issues.

There's one item, though, that I certainly hope we can address, depending on what the recommendation is, and that is this very troubling issue of interhospital transfers. We do have an issue in terms of admitting or not admitting. If you're admitted to a hospital, we realize that you get it paid for. If somehow the

system is not working and you're routed to another hospital, you end up with a bill if you do not have all the appropriate coverage. So that is one that I certainly would pick out of the long list of items under consideration for particular attention.

9:30

With respect, Mr. Chairman, to the Capital health authority and the \$14 million that is before you for consideration, I'd like to say first of all – I think the first speaker on this was the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, but other speakers have alluded to it. His general comment was that we needed to work further on performance measures and accountability within the health care system. We on this side of the House certainly agree with that. Within our business plans across government, I think we'd probably be safe to say that we were one of the first governments, if not the only government at this time, to really work hard at setting performance measures across all departments. We can always improve those, and certainly in Health we need to work further and build upon the work that has already been done in terms of performance and accountability. In the case, though, of the Capital health authority there were certain accountability measures that were in place, such things as waiting lists for certain types of surgery, certain pressure areas.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to just suggest to you that if it would be possible, I could pass on the second part of my speech to the Member for Bow Valley, because he was involved directly in the review. It was one of the recommendations from his committee's report, which we followed through on after examining it, to provide for the \$14 million. If it's acceptable to the Assembly, I would ask him to elaborate on the specific criteria that were used to make that recommendation.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Bow Valley.

DR. OBERG: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, hon. minister. First of all, I think there needs to be some absolute clarification on the Capital health authority's budget, the way they went at arriving at their budget of \$823 million. What they did was they actually went to the clinical department heads and asked: how many dollars do you need, considering this increase in utilization, considering these clinical standards? What do you need to run for the next year? The clinical directors came back with a figure of \$823 million as a final budget.

I think it's really, really important that a couple of points are said in the Assembly. First of all, in that \$823 million there's actually an increase of \$18 million when it comes to patient care expenditures. So in this budget \$18.4 million more is being spent on clinical patient expenditures in Edmonton over last year. Mr. Chairman, the process is extremely important. It was the clinical chiefs who decided this budget.

The other very important point as well, and commending the Capital health authority on it: on non patient care expenditures, Mr. Chairman, which are important to all of us as taxpayers, there was actually a decrease of \$26 million. This would be administrative costs. Anything that is not related to patient care was \$26 million.

In our review several things came out. First of all, as you go through their budget – and it's obvious that the people on the other side have not gone completely through their budget or they would have understood this – there is a \$4 million contingency amount, which is essential when it comes to any budget. It is \$4 million that is not related to patient care expenditures as outlined by the clinical chiefs and department heads, the people who run

it every day, Mr. Chairman. There is \$4 million there. There's another \$4 million in a pay-down of the accumulated deficit. This is not pay-down on the debt; this is actually a pay-down on the capital amount of the accumulated deficit. So right there I've identified \$8 million that is not related to patient care.

Some other issues that have come up. Mr. Chairman, \$1.5 million is being used to service the unused portion of the Edmonton General hospital. I'm sure everyone in this Assembly would agree that we should not be paying \$1.5 million out of health care dollars to service a building; hence our recommendation to put it to public works, whose job it is to look after and rent out that facility. There's \$1.5 million not related to patient care right there.

Mr. Chairman, there is a new food distribution centre that has just been built in Mill Woods. The capacity of this food distribution centre is to provide food to all the hospitals in the area. If this were enacted immediately, savings of \$1.5 million could result. Again, not a patient care issue; something that has to do with administration to save taxpayers' dollars.

Diagnostic imaging. By pooling diagnostic imaging of radiologists in the public and the private sector, the estimate is between \$8 million and \$9 million in savings. Mr. Chairman, we recommended that there could be about \$4 million to \$5 million, as there does need to be some recapitalization.

I really do wish that the opposition would have looked at this a little more carefully. The other point that I really want to make is that when we brought forward our recommendations – and the previous speaker in the Liberal opposition said that the report lacked courage – the Capital health authority thanked us for bringing forward this report. The Capital health authority said they can live within these parameters. The administration said they can live within these parameters. Mr. Chairman, the president of the medical staff stated that this report would lead to better patient care, and that is a direct quote in their research documents, the *Edmonton Sun*, and the *Edmonton Journal*. Dr. Greenwood stated that it will lead to better patient care.

What these estimates have done, from a monetary point of view, is actually gone one step beyond what we recommended. The minister has said that he will give them the \$7 million not as a loan, which we recommended, but as an actual payment. In the last five minutes I've identified about \$9 million to \$10 million. We were told that their budget, at \$737 million, would have looked after the health care needs of people in this region and the people they serve. We have given them in these estimates an extra \$14 million, which is more than what they had asked for when it comes to patient care. Four million dollars contingency, \$4 million deficit pay-down, \$3 million to \$4 million in easily achievable savings immediately.

Mr. Chairman, I think our government has been more than generous. Quite frankly, it was more than what we recommended in our report to the Capital health authority. The Capital health authority, the administration, and the medical staff all said that it would lead to quality patient care. It speaks for itself.

Thank you.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: The hon. Minister of Transportation and Utilities.

MR. FISCHER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to answer a few questions that were asked of me a bit earlier. The Member for Redwater had asked about Highway 28, the priority lists and how they're set, and if she could get one. I should

mention that each year when the budget comes down, there is a list of the priorities that comes out. Every MLA in every constituency gets one, and of course they go out to all of your councils. We are working on establishing, with our primary highway system, putting in a three-year plan so that we can plan further ahead. And yes, we do plan quite a ways ahead on rehabilitation, especially of the primary highways.

When you say, "How are the priorities set?" well, we do continuous evaluation on our primaries. We do it through traffic counts, and we establish the volumes, the patterns, the age of the pavement, safety records, and that type of thing. So yes, I will see to it that you do get a list of your priorities in the Redwater constituency.

9:40

The Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert asked about the resource road program and where the money was going to be spent with that. Well, we have our applications coming in now. We're doing some evaluation with them. We are not finished yet. All of the applications aren't in. Certainly the applications do have to meet the criteria that were set out, and a resource road program is just that. Many of the areas would like to have resource roads when they're getting their own revenue. One of the criteria is that the revenue, the trucks and the upkeep of the road, is in an area or an MD or county that is not getting any of the resource revenue, and that has to be checked out. But I think when you ask where it's being developed or where the development is, it's basically where the resources are traveling through an area into the next area and the benefits of that resource are to the other area.

The Member for West Yellowhead mentioned Highway 40 last night. He was mentioning about how disgraceful that road was. We met with the town of Hinton just a few days ago, and we are looking at it to see if there can't be something done to try and upgrade that road a little bit, because there are resources moving through that area as well. We would let him know when we have the evaluation completed.

The Member for Edmonton-Roper mentioned Driftpile and the \$7 million that was coming from the federal government in disaster services. That \$7 million is a very flexible number, and it was put fairly high. We're not sure of that number yet, and all of the evaluations aren't completed. He did mention what do we do for prevention, and that is a good question, because I think it is time that we do some things to help prevent having to pay disaster funding each year or each time that we have the . . .

MR. DINNING: Question.

MR. FISCHER: Now, the Treasurer I know is very interested in this because it impacts his budget quite a little bit as well.

There has been a study that was commissioned by the federal government – it includes the provincial environment department as well as the Driftpile First Nations – to look at how we can prevent flooding in the future. Hopefully some recommendations will come out of that study and we will be able to see something substantial to help those people up there, because I know that it's very dramatic for those people to lose everything they have each time we have a disaster up there.

With that, I am getting encouraged to sit down, so I would like to take my seat.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: The question has been called. Hon. members, just a reminder that if you want to vote on these estimates, you should be at your seats.

Agreed to:
Community Development
 Operating Expense: \$6,000,000

Health
 Operating Expense: \$20,000,000

Transportation and Utilities
 Operating Expense: \$10,000,000

MR. EVANS: Mr. Chairman, I move that the votes be reported when the committee rises.

[Motion carried]

MR. EVANS: Mr. Chairman, I now move that the committee rise and report progress and request leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Clegg in the Chair]

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

MR. HERARD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions of the 1996-97 supplementary supply estimates, general revenue fund, for the fiscal year ending March 31, 1997, reports the approval of the following estimates, and requests leave to sit again.

Community Development: \$6,000,000, operating expense.

Health: \$20,000,000, operating expense.

Transportation and Utilities: \$10,000,000, operating expense.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Will those in favour of the report, please say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed, if any? Carried.

MR. DINNING: Mr. Speaker, I seek unanimous consent to revert to Introduction of Bills.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Could we have unanimous consent to revert to Introduction of Bills? All those in favour, please say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed, if any? Carried.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

Bill 48
Appropriation (Supplementary
Supply) Act, 1996 (No. 2)

MR. DINNING: Gee, thank y'all, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to move first reading of Bill 48, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 1996 (No. 2). This being a money Bill, His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this Bill, recommends the same to this here Assembly.

[Leave granted; Bill 48 read a first time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
 head: **Second Reading**

Bill 46
Electoral Divisions Act

[Adjourned debate August 19: Mr. Collingwood]

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to continue debate on Bill 46, on the Electoral Boundaries Commission report.

Mr. Speaker, when I concluded my remarks last day I was suggesting that the main issue that the commission had to deal with was the issue of parity and that what the commission had done in fact in its report was give inordinate weight to many of the other elements and factors built into its calculation on the matrix model of effective representation and in my view did not give sufficient weight to population.

I look at the report at page 64. When I read the report and when my constituents read the report with respect to Sherwood Park, if we look at the 1995 population, you see that Sherwood Park with a population of 39,614 has one representative in the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. You go to the line above that, Mr. Speaker, and the community of Medicine Hat, having under the 1995 population a population of 45,892, a difference of 6,278 people, has two members in the Legislative Assembly of the province of Alberta. I ask and what constituents in my area will ask is: how is that effective representation?

DR. TAYLOR: Point of order.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Point of order, hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Point of Order
Clarification

DR. TAYLOR: Yes, actually. Standing Order 23. He said that Medicine Hat had two members. That's not true, Mr. Speaker. Medicine Hat has one member and then another member that represents a third of Medicine Hat and 20,000 square miles of rural Alberta. So to say that Medicine Hat has two members is not correct. I'd appreciate it if he would correct that.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park on the point of order.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Speaking to the point of order, I will acknowledge, then, and accept the point from the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, who says that Medicine Hat does not have two MLAs, that they have one MLA and another MLA. I'll accept that from the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Debate Continued

MR. COLLINGWOOD: In referring to the report, when my constituents read the report and see that with 45,892 there are two representatives in the Assembly and that with 39,614 there's one representative in the Assembly, my constituents are going to rightfully say: how in the world will that translate into effective representation or indeed into parity in the Legislative Assembly?

I then go to the table at 3.2, pages 26 and 27, and if we look

at the highest variance of all of the constituents under the proposed electoral boundaries, which is Calgary-Fish Creek, the population there based on the census . . . [Mr. Collingwood's speaking time expired] I'll just finish this point. The difference between the highest and the lowest, Mr. Speaker is 15,000 people, and that is not parity.

Thank you, sir.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

MR. WICKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to make a few comments pertaining to Bill 46. I want to say right off the bat that I support Bill 46. The process that was originally set up was a tremendously good process, in my opinion, where we had an independent commission.

Now, when the original piece of legislation was passed that set the framework for that particular commission and the mandate for that particular commission, there were some shortcomings. Flexibility in terms of the number of ridings, for example, was not provided. That independent commission did not have that option.

Many, many Albertans are saying we're overgoverned, that there is not a need for the number of MLAs who are in this House, particularly the number of MLAs who are on that side of the House. They'd probably like to see more on this side. Overall there are arguments that could be made for less MLAs. Nevertheless, the independent commission was given a mandate. They had to work under a particular piece of legislation. Bearing that, they did what I feel is a tremendously good job.

It does narrow down the representation somewhat in terms of population between rural Alberta and urban Alberta. It's very easy for those of us in urban Alberta to say that certainly it should be representation by population, equal representation, whatever the case may be. But you drive throughout parts of Alberta, and it doesn't take very long to realize that there are some real difficulties that rural MLAs encounter that urban MLAs don't encounter. Quite frankly, I would not want to go out of my way to represent a rural riding. I would much prefer to represent an urban riding, even if it means representing a larger portion in terms of the number of people compared to the, let's say, overall average.

I look, for example, at my riding of Edmonton-Rutherford, one of the finest ridings in the city of Edmonton. Geographically it goes from 51st Avenue to 23rd Avenue heading south, west 119th to the Calgary Trail. I could wheel that from one end to the other in probably about 17 minutes. When I compare that geographically with some of the ridings in rural Alberta, if I start to wheel, I of course would never get to the other end. That's the difference that is there, and we've got to recognize that.

We have to recognize that there is not equality in terms of the demands between urban and rural. So I accept the fact that there's always going to be some disparity, and we have to recognize that.

The other thing: in the report that led to this particular Bill, Mr. Speaker, there is reference made to a couple of factors that have been overlooked. Those factors deal with additional resources for MLAs representing rural constituents. In other words, to say that they should be able to represent a riding tremendously larger than an urban riding without those additional resources I think is somewhat unfair to those particular MLAs. We have to bear in mind that those people in rural Alberta are

demanding the same access to their Members of the Legislative Assembly as people that reside in the urban centres. Although it's impossible to have it equal, resources, I think, have to be provided to rural MLAs to try and narrow that particular gap.

When the commission met – and I'm going back here to Edmonton-Rutherford – my president, Ed Wrynn, a very, very, fine gentleman, a hardworking person who is very, very concerned, like myself, with the well-being of Edmonton-Rutherford, made a presentation, and I accompanied him to listen. We recommended very specifically that we would like to see a certain portion of Edmonton-Rutherford reduced. The commission heard us out. There was a reduction because we are overpopulated in Edmonton-Rutherford. We're too high over the average. In fact, I think we're the largest throughout the province in terms of population. The commission listened to us and acted accordingly in terms of reducing, but they didn't choose the neighbourhoods that we would have preferred to see them eliminate from Edmonton-Rutherford and make part of Edmonton-Strathcona or Edmonton-Riverview.

Nevertheless, I accept the fact that those five members saw fit to make that particular recommendation to take out of my riding Malmo Plains and put that into the new riding of Edmonton-Riverview. I do hate to see Malmo Plains go. It's a very, very compatible neighbourhood in terms of the others in my riding like Royal Gardens, Greenfield, Ermineskin, Duggan, and so on and so forth. In their wisdom they made that decision because of other factors that were at play, such as what is best for Edmonton-Riverview, what is best for Edmonton-Strathcona and so forth.

So considering, as I wrap up here, Mr. Speaker, the mandate that independent commission had to act under, considering that a commitment was made from my point of view as an individual MLA – I'm speaking from my own point of view, not on behalf of my colleagues. A commitment was made as far as I was concerned that no matter what that independent commission were to recommend, I would accept it because it is a preferable option in terms of process than what happened the last time around, when we had a group of government MLAs deciding what boundaries should be placed for the various constituencies. We can see some of the difficulties that arose there.

Difficulties were almost encountered for the good Member for Edmonton-Whitemud and myself in that there was an original recommendation and then because of amendments that were made by the Member for Edmonton-Parkallen at that time, Mr. Doug Main, who's no longer a member of course, there were changes made that made it much more compatible for me, much more compatible for the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud. It was fortunate that that was brought forward at the last minute. Otherwise it would have been a disaster in the southwest portion of the city. I assume that that task force of government MLAs created problems throughout the province because it was a political body. It wasn't an independent body.

So that is why I believe it is so important to respect the process, give support, give assurances, show confidence in the findings of an independent commission, because in my opinion, Mr. Speaker, there is no other more viable way to go than having that independent commission. On that basis, I fully support Bill 46.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MR. HENRY: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I, too,

would like to speak on second reading of Bill 46, the Electoral Divisions Act. A few points that I would like to make. I don't want to go through the whole history of how the process was generated and what led to the situation where we have to redo the boundaries at this point. That's been recounted several times. I do want to emphasize that I was pleased that an independent commission was appointed to be able to try to redraw the boundaries and to come up with a more equitable solution than certainly we had in the past. I want to commend the individual members who were on that commission. I think all of them were exemplary.

One of the things that I would have liked to have seen in the legislation that we drafted and that we passed in this House that established the commission was a reduction in the total number of MLAs, but that was not within the commission's power to deal with. So I'm not going to go into that much further. That's a decision that we made here.

10:00

In addition, Mr. Speaker, I am aware that the commission members made a commitment to each other and to the people of Alberta that what they would do is they would not do what one of the previous commissions did before the last election: come up with five independent reports. They all were determined to come up with one report. They did that, and I commend them for that.

Now, we've heard a lot about the interim report and the final report and the variations in population. I want it on record that I believe that this report and the legislation that's based on the report take a step in the right direction but aren't quite good enough. It doesn't quite ring. We're not going to get exact numbers in terms of voter parity between various jurisdictions, but this takes us a little step closer to that one person, one vote.

There are some glaring discrepancies which we see over and over again. One of the problems we have is that obviously if you're in a rural constituency in our province – I'm over-generalizing, and I want to point that out – your vote is going to be worth more than it will if your vote is in perhaps Edmonton-Centre. I note that between the interim report and the final report there was a reduction in the total number of voters in Edmonton-Centre, in my riding. I'm sorry in this report to lose the community of Prince Rupert, which is in my riding and was added to the riding prior to 1993, but like the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford I respect the fact that we've had an independent commission. They make the decisions the best they see fit and try to satisfy the requirements of the Charter as well as requirements of fairness and justice. For that reason I accept the fact that that community will no longer be in my riding.

Aside from the population variances, we've heard in this House several members get up and talk about how much more difficult it is to represent a rural riding than it is an urban riding. You won't find many urban ridings that are, quote, more urban, unquote, than Edmonton-Centre, right in downtown Edmonton, one of the most urban ridings represented in this Legislature.

I appreciate some of the comments made about distance, about having to travel two hours to go to an evening meeting. Mr. Speaker, I appreciate some of the comments made about distance and sparsity of population because I, too, have lived and worked in rural Alberta. In fact, in my tenure, my time in Alberta I have spent more time in rural Alberta than I have in urban Alberta, and I understand. I remember when I first came to this province in the '70s, I covered an area that was in those days 50 miles east and west and about 70 miles north and south, and I was on the road constantly in very sparsely populated areas. So I appreciate that.

However, I think what hasn't been appreciated – and I don't think it's quite reflected in the matrix that's in this report – are the unique difficulties in a very urban riding in terms of being able to represent those. I think the matrix that's been developed here is useful, and it has some strengths. I think its weakness lies in that it deals with purely geographic issues like how many municipalities, how many school divisions, how many kilometres of road, those kinds of things. It seems to me that we're representing people, that we're all in this Legislature representing individuals and not representing incorporated bodies. The Member for Dunvegan doesn't represent the municipality of Spirit River but instead represents the people of Spirit River. It seems to me that that's what we need to focus on, and the matrix fails in that.

Let me give you an example. I defy any member, urban or rural, to stand up in this Legislature and indicate that they have more than 26 identified linguistic groups living in their constituency. We are still counting; we're at 26 right now. The difficulties that incurs, the challenges – they're not difficulties; they're challenges – I think are difficult to appreciate for those who might come from a more homogeneous riding. Every time an individual walks into my office and seeks assistance, especially if it's a senior who hasn't always had the opportunity to learn the language or learn how our system works or if it's a new Canadian, whether it be assistance with an immigration problem, which happens a lot, a WCB problem, a health care problem, any sort, Mr. Speaker, I have to be able to understand them. So one of the things my office has to do and one of the challenges we have is that we've had to develop a roster of interpreters, volunteer interpreters, people that we can call on to come into our office and help us to help our constituents. That's a uniqueness that can't be laid out geographically but does directly affect or impact on the ability of a member to represent a particular constituency.

As well, Mr. Speaker, looking at population variance and demographics, the matrix doesn't take those into account. Aside from maybe one other riding in the province, Edmonton-Centre has a higher proportion of senior citizens than any other riding, perhaps save Calgary-*Buffalo*. That is of course because individuals tend to move downtown, quite often from rural areas. They move to downtown Edmonton. They used to move to downtown Edmonton because the Edmonton General and the Youville were there, and quite often their partners were there. Now, we know what the government has done with those facilities, but because of ease of services, ease of transportation, and safety in high-rise condos, a lot of senior citizens move in.

Well, if we look at the past three years, for instance – and the Minister of Community Development will appreciate the number of inquiries about the seniors' benefits and about the seniors' benefits that have been withdrawn by this government – again it's not geographically based, but it's very, very clear that there is a higher percentage of not just seniors but low-income seniors living in my riding. Maybe one of the things we should have considered in the matrix, if we're going to consider the number of municipalities, is we should have considered numbers of seniors' residences, numbers of nursing homes, numbers of seniors' subsidized accommodation, because all those have their own unique kinds of challenges in terms of representation as well.

As well as linguistic groups, ethnocultural groups are more represented in an urban riding, certainly more in a downtown urban riding, than they are in a riding perhaps like *Cardston*. I daresay that in *Cardston* – the last time I was there – you might have half a dozen different ethnocultural groups in the whole

riding. Well, we're between 25 and 30 in my riding, and each one of those, Mr. Speaker, has a separate organization, has a separate set of community events.

Yes, as an urban MLA I don't have to travel two hours to go to an event or meet with a group. Because it is a defined, limited geographic area, it is not unusual for me to visit three or four groups in the space of one evening, all who want time, all who have issues that they want to talk to me about in their own community, and all of whom are based in my community.

10:10

As well, there's been no consideration given with regard to the nature of downtown urban constituencies. One of the problems we have in our constituency is that the minister responsible for lotteries has indicated that in a general sense there is an equal amount or a close to equal amount of money available in the CFEP for each constituency. If you go to a constituency such as Three Hills-Airdrie, I daresay you're not going to have the Alberta Basketball Association or the Alberta Paraplegic Association, yet in a downtown riding, because of office space, because of public transportation, et cetera, you tend to have more of those provincial and national and regional groups located.

When the CFEP grants are calculated for my constituency, even though these people don't live in my constituency, if a provincial association or a regional association based in my constituency applies for a CFEP grant and meets the criteria and gets the grant, that then is chalked up against Edmonton-Centre, which means the residents of Edmonton-Centre have less access to the CFEP, assuming I follow what the minister said, that there's an equal amount per constituency. So that's a unique challenge, to try to get those. I have groups in my constituency come to me and say: "Well, who else got the CFEP grants? We didn't get one. We were told we had to wait till next year." I asked the minister for the list, and I give him credit that he provided it to me, and I gave it to the community groups and they said, "Well, that doesn't represent our constituency. Most of those people live up in St. Albert." Yet their office or their association is in my constituency. So that's another unique characteristic that can't be measured in terms of geographics alone.

So there are a few issues that you don't take into account in the matrix. One of the things that I am glad they did take into account when I made a submission to the commission is that whether the commission created a riding that was 10 percent above or 10 percent below the average riding, one of the factors that I understand they looked at was population growth or estimated population growth since the last census. It is common for an individual to look at a constituency in suburbia and say, "Oh, there's a new subdivision. Well, that must be a growing area." But you look at downtown Edmonton and you say, "Well, it's probably fairly static." Well, one of the things I was able to pull out, and this changes the nature of representing a constituency, is that since the last census in Edmonton-Centre alone 1,200 new - I'm rounding off - condominium units were built in infill. So therefore that kind of information isn't geographically visible because it's kind of hidden between. It's new buildings, old buildings torn down and larger ones put up, whereas if you go to a rural riding, you automatically see the expansion.

Also, Mr. Speaker, we know that one of the things that all 83 of us in this Legislature do, I hope, is spend some time in our riding knocking on doors, asking people what they think of issues going. In a rural area it is more difficult, and I will acknowledge that, because you're not walking from door to door. You're driving from door to door. That makes it harder, and I grant it,

and it presents a certain challenge in terms of representing a rural constituency.

If you want a challenge, try to go door knocking where there are condominium units that all have security. You just can't walk in and buzz and say, "Let me in, I want to door knock." I'll tell you, Mr. Speaker, the legislation is very clear that in condominium units there is a requirement to allow the elected MLA or nominated candidate to door knock, but even if that provision is there, it's not the way that I like to go because quite often, again, a lot of seniors, a lot of women who are living alone - a guy of my size knocking on their door, they might call 911.

So, the point I want to make here, Mr. Speaker, is that in a rural riding you can just suddenly decide you want to go door knocking that evening and you can drive, or in a town you can go door to door. Driving from farm to farm has its own challenges because you spend more time in the car. What some of the members across don't appreciate is that in a downtown urban riding . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: I live in your riding.

MR. HENRY: And I daresay I've knocked on your door, hon. member.

Mr. Speaker, the challenge in an urban riding is that I simply can't decide now that I want to go door knocking tomorrow night in a particular building. I have to talk with the management in respect for the feeling of safety of individuals, especially seniors and especially women. I want notices put up with my mug on it so they know that if there's somebody in the hall.

DR. TAYLOR: So they know it's you and not Stan.

MR. HENRY: So they know it's me and not Stan.

Also, Mr. Speaker, it's important for the individuals at those doors, especially in buildings where there are a lot of seniors living alone and a lot of women living alone, older and younger, that I have somebody with me that they recognize, somebody from their building or their manager. You can't arrange that just on a whim. So that has a particular kind of challenge that I don't think some of the rural members acknowledge or realize.

Another challenge in representing an urban constituency as opposed to a rural - and I want to make it again clear; I don't negate the challenges of representing a rural riding. I've lived in rural ridings in this province, and there are challenges, but in urban ridings you tend to have more transient populations, especially in the downtown core, because you have more rental accommodation.

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Hon. member, I think there are about four or five people in the House that are just testing my patience, and if the hon. chair of all the committees would like to go outside and have a meeting with the hon. minister without portfolio responsible for children's services, I would suggest they do that rather than interrupt the House totally. It's been going on for the last 10 minutes, and it just gets worse. If in fact you don't want to listen to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, that's your choice, but there are some people trying to listen and can't do it.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MR. HENRY: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for those wise words. I daresay you never cease to earn my admiration. A lesser man or woman would have named them and thrown them out a long time ago.

Debate Continued

MR. HENRY: Mr. Speaker, the point I was making about representing an urban riding and the nature of the transient population is that . . . [interjections] I see white flags on the other side, but if you'll bear with me, I have a few more points to make. [interjections] Mr. Speaker, I'm getting several white flags on the other side, for the record, but if they'd all do it in unison, I might just concede. Bear with me.

The nature of a transient population in downtown . . . [interjections] Mr. Speaker, I'm surrounded. What can I do? I think I've raised the point about the transient population and the nature of the large number of rentals and voters lists not being constant

and whatnot and that being a unique challenge.

I do want to continue this debate, and believe me, Mr. Speaker, I daresay it's time for me to move that we do adjourn this debate now.

Thank you.

10:20

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre has moved that we adjourn debate on Bill 46. All those in favour, please say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed, if any? Carried.

[At 10:21 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

