

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, May 6, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/05/06

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Renew us with Your strength. Focus us in our deliberations. Challenge us in our service to the people of this great province. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly some 20 bright-eyed grades 4, 5, and 6 students from New Bridgen school. They are accompanied by parent helpers and drivers Twighla Christianson, Nicky Beynon, Delbert Pratt, Darren Simpson, and, if the House would indulge me some motherly pride, their teacher, my daughter Tami Cox. I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly five very special guests. Nicolas Mancuso is a 13-year-old junior high student from Lyons, France. He's here as part of an education program where travel to other countries facilitates their studies in foreign languages. Nicolas is attending D.S. MacKenzie junior high school in Edmonton for three weeks. He's made the trip along with 24 other students, 16 of whom are in Edmonton and eight in Calgary. He's here today with his host family, who I'm proud to say are constituents in Edmonton-Whitemud, Ron and Karen Henderson, along with their children Lindsay and Thomas. In Lindsay's past she was an excellent ringette player; I'm sure she still is.

I might add that the Hendersons are ensuring that Nicolas will be taking some unique souvenirs back with him such as saskatoon jam and peanut butter and, of course, maple syrup, just to name a few. They will be going to Drumheller to the Royal Tyrrell Museum in the Deputy Premier's constituency. They'll be going to Lake Louise over the weekend. Nicolas's visit to Edmonton and to Canada is fast coming to a close, and I understand that Thomas is hoping to go back to France to do a reciprocal visit. I'd ask the five visitors to stand and please accept the warm traditional welcome of our Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I also have other guests today, and I'm pleased to introduce them to you and through you to members of the Assembly. They're here today to observe the estimates of the Department of Seniors. They're folks who are with the Elder Advocates, and my colleague from Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview introduced them earlier this week and had a member's statement with respect to Lou and Ruth Adria, members of my constituency and people who constantly keep me apprised of issues in the community with respect to seniors and seniors' care.

Also, with them today are Anne Pavelich, Joe Green, Kathryn Kutt, Sam Francis, and Kay Reid. As I said, they're here to observe the estimates for the Department of Seniors. I'd ask them to stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly family members of one of our Legislature pages, Vanessa Pillay. I would like to introduce her brother, Patrick Pillay, a grade 8 student at Kenilworth junior high school; her mother, Barbara Pillay, who works at the Northern Alberta Brain Injury Society; and her father, Joe Pillay, who works at the Boyle Street Co-op as a work experience co-ordinator. They are all very proud of Vanessa, as are all members in the Assembly. I would ask the family members to now please rise – they are in your gallery – and receive the warm welcome of everyone. Welcome.

It's also my pleasure to introduce four constituents of mine from the Edmonton-Mill Creek area who also are here this afternoon to observe the proceedings of the House and, in particular, estimates related to the Department of Seniors. We have with us Thomas Kennedy, Kathleen Kennedy, Henry Palindat, and Barbara Palindat. I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome. Thank you all very much for coming as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of this Legislative Assembly two constituents of Edmonton-Gold Bar. They are Frank and Joan Baer, and they live in the community of Forest Heights. Mr. Baer was born and raised in Edmonton. He's a retired plumber who worked for AGT, now Telus. Mrs. Baer at one time worked for the provincial department of agriculture. Together they raised two sons and two daughters, who all graduated from the University of Alberta and went on to complete their master's degrees as well. They now have nine grandchildren, six of whom live in Edmonton and three in Ottawa, and they are the proud grandparents of Legislature page Vanessa Pillay. They're in your gallery, Mr. Speaker. I would now ask them to rise and receive the warm and traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise today on behalf of the Member for Livingstone-Macleod to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 14 bright, young, smart students from Glenwood, Alberta. They told me that that's true and that they would prove it by hard work and through their marks, so we'll hold them to that. They're accompanied today by their principal and teacher, Kelly Thomas, and his wife, Kathy. I would ask them to rise and please receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc.

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have an introduction to make on behalf of the Minister of Learning. They are employees of Alberta Learning's corporate services division, and they are Mrs. Linda Warren, Miss Jenese Derby, Miss Tammy Embree, Mrs. Nadine Schrader, Miss Rita Craveiro, Mrs. Tasha Fadish, Mrs. Melanie White, Miss Erin Murray. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 17 very enthusiastic students from Kneehill Christian school, which

is just outside Linden, Alberta, and as you know, it's not very far from my place. They're here today accompanied by 10 adults, and I'll read their names off: Miss Terri Miller, their teacher; Miss Becky Baerg, another teacher; and parent helpers Mr. and Mrs. Virgil Unruh, Mr. and Mrs. Gary Klassen, Mr. and Mrs. Ron Isaac, as well as Mrs. Wanda Unruh and Mrs. Rosalie Unruh. I would ask them all to rise in the public gallery and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 21 very bright students from the Islamic school of Calgary. Among the students is my own niece, Samar Amery. The students are accompanied today by four adults: Rychelle Gibson, teacher; Chrefie Charanek, Hassan Ahmed, and Ryan Katchur. I'd like to ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly students from the Anne Fitzgerald school located in my constituency. They are of course studying politics as part of their curriculum and are here to observe the political process first-hand. I'd like to ask them to stand at this time. They're seated in the members' gallery. Along with the students are teacher Mr. Zenari and parents and helpers Mr. Ford and Mrs. Klassen. They should be standing, and I'd like the House to give them a very warm welcome at this time.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm pleased to introduce to you and to Members of the Legislative Assembly two guests from Tourism Medicine Hat. Tourism Medicine Hat operates two visitor information centres in southeastern Alberta, a year-round operation in Medicine Hat, as well as the Travel Alberta visitor information centre at Walsh on the Saskatchewan border. Serving as the gateway to Alberta, Canada's sunniest city welcomes travellers from across the continent and, indeed, around the world. Last year the Medicine Hat centre alone served nearly 50,000 visitors. In Edmonton to participate in training sessions to prepare for the upcoming tourist season, they are seated in the public gallery, and I would ask Dominique Hirsch, general manager, and Jennifer McKim, marketing manager, to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of all members.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To you and through you to members of the Assembly it's my great pleasure to introduce Luke Wilson. Luke attends Avalon junior high school in the city. He plays in the school band, he's a computer whiz, he's an honours and distinction student, and he is the brother of our page Natalie Wilson, who is profoundly proud of her younger brother. So we'd ask Luke to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure to introduce to you and through you four special guests that are with us

today. As indicated by the carnation that is on your desk, May is MS Awareness Month, and I have several people connected with the Multiple Sclerosis Society, Alberta division, Edmonton chapter, that are with us today.

Before I introduce them, they asked me what the best way was to extend an invitation to all Members of the Legislative Assembly to get involved in a Super Cities Walk or the bike tours that will be held through the months of May and June to raise needed funds for research and programs for MS. I'm that conduit, so I am inviting you, my colleagues, to get involved. Please participate.

With us today is Mr. David Andrews, who is a board member with the MS Society, Alberta division; Joan Ozirny, who is the vice-chair on the board of the MS Edmonton chapter. Joan went to school with the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster and was telling me some very interesting facts prior to question period. Marie Iwanow is the communications manager, Alberta division, and is responsible for the many hundreds and hundreds of carnations that will go out across the province this month, and Alison Hagan is the director of development, Alberta division. I would ask my guests to rise and please receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a gentleman I have come to know well, particularly through his very fast typing fingers on the e-mail. I would like to ask Kevan Rhead to rise, please. He's in the public gallery today. Mr. Rhead is a seniors' advocate, and I'm sure that many of you have heard from him. So please join me in welcoming Mr. Rhead.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to rise this afternoon and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Mario Molinari and Teresa Molinari. They are seated in the public gallery, and with your permission I'd ask both of them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you to all of my colleagues in the Assembly a number of seniors. They are here today to observe the debate on the Seniors' budget estimates and to take part in the seniors' rally outside on the Legislature steps this afternoon. My guests are seated in the public gallery. I'll identify them by their names and ask them to rise and wait until they receive the warm welcome of the Assembly: Alan Dane, Nadine Hooper, Geraldine Ennis, Gordon Steele. Would you please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly a constituent of mine who has been doing business in and has resided in Edmonton-Highlands for over 25 years. He is here today to observe the proceedings of the Legislature. I would ask Mr. Leslie Sax to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to

members of the Assembly a group of seniors who are in the public gallery today. They are here to observe the debate on the estimates for the Department of Seniors, and I would ask them to rise as I read their names and then receive the warm welcome of the Assembly: Pauline Ricard, who is a constituent of mine, Olive Thorne, and Irene Krasowski. I'd ask them to please rise if they're here.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly two individuals from Toronto, Ontario, that are very special to our page Maya Gordon, who is also a constituent of mine. They are her aunt and uncle. I would ask Barbara Gordon, who is an actress in Ontario, and Doug Rodger, who is a playwright, to please rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Automobile Insurance Reform

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Earlier this week the Premier challenged me to compare my auto insurance costs in Alberta to those in other provinces and table the results. Well, consider it done, Mr. Premier, and the proof is clear. For coverage equivalent to my family's, auto insurance is \$1,200 to \$2,000 a year cheaper in provinces with public auto insurance than it is here in Alberta. To the Premier: will this government finally consider public auto insurance given that it could save countless Alberta families thousands of dollars a year?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, to address the preamble and the news release that was issued by the Liberals, the news release states, if you don't mind me using names, "Taft was challenged by Premier Klein yesterday in the legislature to prove that public auto insurance would reduce his premiums." That's not what I said at all, and if I recall, the challenge wasn't to this hon. member. It was to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands. So that is not true and it's misleading.

Mr. Speaker, we are working through the process. No, we don't plan to go to socialized insurance like they have in Saskatchewan, the kind of insurance that the Liberals so adore. Our goals with auto insurance reform remain unchanged, and we're going to live up to our commitments. I'm not going to speculate about what the detailed regulations will involve and how they will impact drivers other than to say that we will fulfill our commitment that rates in Alberta will be comparable to those in other provinces. For the majority of drivers, including most members of the opposition, I'm sure that will be the case if it's not already the case.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I won't answer right now because I'm sure that there will be ample opportunity during the supplementaries to get into some of the details relative to his press release and his claims.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, does the Premier expect Albertans to be satisfied that under his government's plan premiums won't go up when under a public auto insurance plan like we're advocating, premiums could go down by thousands of dollars a year?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, maybe the hon. member will explain to the media outside the House – I know he won't here – how he plans to dismantle all of the insurance companies that exist here in Alberta and say: with the great hand of government the Liberals will now socialize all insurance.

It sounds like Allende in Chile, you know, when he took over all the copper mines and said: the Americans are out; the government now owns all the copper mines, all the minerals, all the resources, all the mining, all the newspapers. Pinochet came in, Mr. Speaker – and I'm not saying that Pinochet was any better, but because of the only elected communist in Chile, Allende, and the socialist reforms he put in, Pinochet was forced, I would say, to mount a coup. As a dictator he was no better than Allende. Of course, the debate still goes on. All you need to do is to go to the web site. As a matter of fact, I did a paper on it, and I'll give it to you.

The Speaker: Thank you very much.

Speaker's Ruling

Oral Question Period Rules

The Speaker: You know, answers in this Assembly are oftentimes the result of the question. Can I just again repeat *Beauchesne* 409. *Beauchesne* 409(3) says,

The question ought to seek information and, therefore, cannot be based upon a hypothesis, cannot seek an opinion, either legal or otherwise, and must not suggest its own answer, be argumentative or make representations." Now, these are the rules.

The hon. leader.

Automobile Insurance Reform

(continued)

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll draw the Premier's attention to page 1210 in *Hansard* and the debate there.

My question: why won't the Premier concede that his current plan has gone way off the road and simply give Albertans public auto insurance now?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know if the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition can't understand or simply won't understand, refuses to listen. As I've said, the caucus of this government is currently developing regulations associated with this plan. Nothing has been finalized yet, but we do have some broad policy objectives to achieve. We want to make sure that good young male drivers are not penalized simply because they are male and between the ages of 16 and 25, we want to make sure that male seniors 65 years of age and over are not penalized simply because they are male and they are older, and we want to make sure that those in the mid-range are paying comparable rates.

Now, as much as the hon. Leader of the Opposition is trying to make a great deal out of this, there are all kinds of things that he misses in his press release. First of all, he fails to mention that there was a disclaimer on all three web sites from Manitoba, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan that his researchers researched, and those disclaimers clearly show that the figures may not be accurate and are provided as estimates only. In his news release he failed to mention that his wife had a speeding ticket and she is designated as a driver. We don't know if that information was included in the Saskatchewan, B.C., and Manitoba scenario.

The Speaker: I think we'll just go on to the second question. The Leader of the Official Opposition.

Education Funding

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government continues to send mixed messages about the actual dollars it allocates to public education, mixing past funding commitments with present and future commitments and leaving Albertans with the impression that the recommendations of the Learning Commission will be fully funded. Well, that's just not the case. Early indications show that school boards across the province will be carrying deficits this fall. My questions are to the Premier. Will the Premier fully fund the arbitrated teachers' settlement so that school boards like Calgary, Red Deer, and Edmonton do not have to start the school year this fall in the red?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the hon. Minister of Learning, as you notice, is not here. I will take the question under advisement.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, again to the Premier: why haven't school boards like Edmonton public been able to hire back all the teachers that were laid off last year if not for the lack of government funding?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, all I can say is that there was an increase in the budget of some \$284 million. That is not peanuts. We're talking about a lot more money than a \$27.50 jug of orange juice, which they like to talk about.

Relative to the question I will take it under advisement for the hon. minister.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that teachers in Calgary are on the verge of striking over classroom conditions, will the Premier admit that he's not keeping his promise to fully fund the recommendations of the Learning Commission?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we're working through the recommendations of the Learning Commission.

Again, relative to the specifics I'll take the question under advisement.

The Speaker: The third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Gasoline Prices

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is very hard for the Premier to understand the impact on motorists of high gasoline prices when seven days a week, 24 hours a day an airplane taxi paid for by taxpayers is a phone call away. With gasoline prices around 80 cents a litre the Premier is now considering pre-election gasoline rebates, but in 2001 when gasoline was around 75 cents a litre, the Official Opposition called for an all-party committee from this House to study high retail gasoline prices and the Premier again waffled on the issue. My first question is to the Premier. After dropping the ball in 2001, will the Premier now immediately strike an all-party committee to investigate high retail gasoline prices here in this province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, to address the preamble, the airplanes are not a taxi service. The Liberal opposition, of course, save for one, won't know about the use of aircraft or anything else

because they're all from Edmonton. But I'll tell you that had the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar used taxicabs instead of his own vehicle, he would have saved the taxpayers probably thousands of dollars travelling around his constituency, incurring a cost last year of over \$10,000 to travel around a constituency that you could spit across.

Mr. Speaker, we will be visiting the whole situation of gasoline prices. You have to understand that this is not a phenomenon that is common to Alberta. I've just been advised by one of my colleagues that a friend of hers in British Columbia, in Nanaimo, was paying \$1.02 a litre. I'm advised by another colleague that of the price of gasoline approximately \$10, \$11 is in taxes, and almost \$7 of that goes to their federal cousins in Ottawa.

Having said all that, Mr. Speaker, we will be examining the whole issue of gasoline prices, and, no, we are not going to strike an all-party committee.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the Premier: given that the Premier has struck committees on high electricity prices and high insurance rates – this hon. member travels across the province trying to find solutions to the problems you created – why won't you now strike an all-party committee to study high gasoline prices? What are you afraid of?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that's very interesting. I'm wondering if during the course of his investigations he charged mileage to the government, if he used his own vehicle, at 37 cents a kilometre, or did he by chance use a government aircraft from time to time? I don't know. You know, maybe he can respond to that.

Mr. Speaker, we're going to look at this situation.

You know, it's amazing. I have to commend the *Edmonton Sun* because really it was a suggestion of one of the columnists, Neil Waugh. Of course, the Liberals either steal it from the NDs – right? – or they steal it from the *Edmonton Sun* or they do their research in the *Edmonton Journal*. In this case, they're following up on an *Edmonton Sun* story that was initiated by one of their columns. This is a good example for all Albertans to observe of how the Liberals do their research and how they develop policy.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: instead of throwing pre-election money at the problem, why not deal with sky-high gasoline prices directly? Why are you refusing to tackle the problem?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, to say that we are refusing to tackle the problem is not telling the truth again. I have indicated to the hon. member that we will be having a caucus, cabinet, perhaps Treasury Board discussion relative to this issue. I indicated to the columnist that while it may sound like a good idea, and certainly all Albertans would like to receive some money, we would have to examine the downsides as well. Like everything else, you weigh the pros and the cons. All the Liberals do is stand up and spout off and say whatever is politically right. In other words, they find out which way the wind is blowing one day, hold their finger up, and, well, if the wind changes the next day, they change their tune.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Health Care Reforms

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the past few years the Tory government has hiked seniors' health care premiums 30 per cent, long-term care fees by over 50 per cent, and eliminated universal eye care and dental benefits, but this is small change compared to what the government has in store for seniors in its still-secret health care plan. At the recent Tory party convention the health minister unveiled a proposal to cap or eliminate provincial drug coverage outside of hospitals, a change that would take more than \$300 million out of the pockets of the province's seniors each year. My questions are to the Premier. Given that the government has already hiked copayments on the seniors' drug plan by 30 per cent, why would the government add to the financial misery of seniors by hatching a secret plan to either cap or even eliminate seniors' prescription drug coverage?

Speaker's Ruling Anticipation

The Speaker: The hon. leader knows that the tradition in the House is that the day on which certain estimates are before the Assembly, questions will not be asked in the question period about the estimates of that particular department. As I understand, on the Order Paper, notice of which was given at least one week ago, this afternoon the main estimates consideration is the Department of Seniors. So if questions are dealing with that that will impact the budget or be a part of the budget, our tradition has been not to deal with it. If it's a question dealing with general policy, that's another matter.

If the Premier wishes to deal with this question, he can.

Mr. Mason: It's health care, Mr. Premier. It's health care. Nice dodge.

The Speaker: No, no, no. Please. Sit down.

To the third party House leader: that last interjection is totally out of order. There is no dodge. We are dealing with the rules of this Assembly, rules which the member himself has agreed to and has been an author of. You cannot play the game both ways, hon. member. That was an unnecessary statement.

I'm prepared to accept and recognize the leader of the alternate party to proceed with his second question now.

Health Care Reforms

(continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions relate to health care. The second question to the Premier: given that seniors receive three-quarters of the \$400 million in provincially paid drug benefits, why won't the Premier admit that drug benefits can't be capped or eliminated without hurting seniors?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, this whole question relates to health and health reform although it does relate in some ways to seniors. As you know, we are working through the health reform package right now, and it will be tabled sometime in June for all to see. There will be a public consultation process, and vis-à-vis drug costs as they relate to seniors or any other segment of society, the hon. member will have ample opportunity at that time to comment on what the plan says.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplementary to the

Premier. I'll be certainly happy to wait for the Premier's unveiling of a new plan. In the meantime when will the government accept the New Democratic opposition's proposal to eliminate seniors' health care premiums, thereby saving seniors living on fixed incomes \$90 million?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the hon. minister of health may wish to supplement, and with your permission I'll ask him to do that, but I want to point out that approximately 165,000 seniors, or 50 per cent of the total seniors population, those over 65 years of age in this province, pay absolutely no health insurance premiums at all. Another 6 per cent of the seniors pay partial premiums. I would say that the estimated forgone revenue of health care premium exemptions for low-income seniors in Alberta is approximately \$100 million annually.

Mr. Speaker, when we dealt with this issue, we had some difficulty. It's always difficult to deal with seniors' issues, but we as a government have a fundamental policy and philosophy that we offer a hand up rather than a handout and that those who can truly care for themselves in society shall do so, whether they're young people, middle-aged people, or elderly people. Those seniors who have high incomes and can afford to pay premiums pay premiums. Those seniors who are in the low-income range – and I mentioned that 50 per cent fall into that range – pay no premiums at all. People in the mid-range who have not reached the peak and are somewhere in between pay partial payments relative to their premiums.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Gasoline Pricing

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Residents of St. Albert recently and in particular in this past week were shocked, surprised, and somewhat alarmed to see the rising high price of gas at the pumps. I'd include myself in that. The argument and the question that has been posed to me by my constituents and which I pose to the Minister of Energy in this Assembly: if we provincially own the oil and gas rights here in this province, why is the price of gas at the pump not lower in Alberta than other places in Canada?

Mr. Smith: Well, in fact, Alberta does average the lowest price per litre of gas in Canada over an average piece of time. A barrel of oil goes into the refinery, and roughly around 160 litres of gas are produced from each barrel. That is then distributed throughout Alberta, western Canada. We ship gasoline as far east as Winnipeg and as far west as the island.

2:10

There are certain market factors that do impact on the price of gasoline. Those are switching over from winter stocks and moving to a different octane rating in the summer. There is also the increased demand. Any time there's such tremendous economic growth in a province like Alberta, it strains the supply lines. Mr. Speaker, as you well know, there have been no new refineries announced to refine more gasoline and bring it to the marketplace.

So our gasoline is a function of supply and demand. There have been countless studies put forward through the Competition Bureau, through federal bodies. They have found no collusion, no interference from the industries.

If you look at the price of gas, you can see a substantial amount of tax attached to the gas, Mr. Speaker. I have, for example, a Petro-Canada receipt in my hand here. It says: provincial fuel tax, \$4.06. But then I go on: federal excise tax, \$4.51, and GST, tax on a tax,

\$2.43. Total taxes on a \$37 purchase: \$11. That's outrageous from a federal Liberal perspective.

Mrs. O'Neill: My one and only supplemental to the same minister: could you please tell this Assembly what the government has forecasted for the price of oil for the remainder of the current fiscal year and what assumptions the department has made for the price of oil for the remainder of this budget year?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, I would direct the member to pages 98 through 100 of the business plans and the document Economic Outlook: Budget 2004, which points out the process by which the Department of Energy makes its forecast, to find out that in fact we're on the low side. It's a conservative forecast yet still progressive in nature. I think that I would much rather be on the low side of the forecast than the high side. We do take a number of experts' forecasts into play, and then we do make the calculation.

But we have to remember, Mr. Speaker, that today there are terrorist threats against the major supplier on the North American continent. Eastern Canada buys its oil to refine into gasoline on the high seas. So as much as we can control prices here with the production in Alberta, it's a very small part of the overall cost of gasoline that's added across Canada and across North America, and that in itself leads to the pricing of a commodity in a fair market competitive situation.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for St. Albert, are you finished?

Mrs. O'Neill: No. I'd like to have a second supplemental. My question, then, zeroes in on the question of assumptions that were made by the department. I'll maybe even rephrase it into predictions or the future of the price of oil or gas.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that the beaches are littered with those who have tried to make accurate oil forecasts. As early as three or four years ago oil was \$23 a barrel, and it stopped a great deal of exploration. The assumptions are that we try to forecast the orderly flow of supply from the Middle East. We try to forecast the demand, the amount that would go through refineries from the increased refinery base, and then, I guess, you stir it all together and you try to come up with an answer that fits the circumstances and world events of the day. Frankly, to see gasoline rise at this rate during the year of a presidential election is quite surprising. So there are a number of factors that go into it, some scientific and some just art.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Peace River.

SuperNet

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Innovation and Science's analogy comparing the SuperNet to a firehose and regular Internet to a garden hose can also describe the flow of dollars from the taxpayers' pocket. With the garden hose taxpayers paid one charge for the Internet. The firehose, or SuperNet, involves a hookup charge, a service charge, and a separate Internet provider charge. What started as a trickle has now become a flood. My questions are to the Minister of Innovation and Science. Given that the minister hasn't been able to tell us what the SuperNet is going to cost over the next 10 years, how do we know that taxpayers aren't going to be on the hook for another NovAtel?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, as I've discussed many times in this Assembly, the SuperNet is an infrastructure development that takes a data transmission network right across Alberta. Bell West as part of their commitment is investing a minimum of \$100 million into the base network. The Alberta government is investing \$193 million into the extended network, which completes the infrastructure build. That number has been the number that we've used when the contract was signed, has been used when we gave our estimates, and continues to be used today.

Ms Blakeman: Can the minister tell us who is going to pay for the equipment needed, such as new computers, video cameras, software, et cetera, for libraries and others to take advantage of the SuperNet and perform high-speed data transfers? Who's supposed to pay for that?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, businesses, companies, governments, and individuals have been buying computer equipment, software for years and years. That's no change from today. With the advent of technology – and I'm sure the hon. member would not want to go back to the days of eight-track – we can deliver more bandwidth, better services at efficient prices.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: when will the service contract between Axia and the government end? Is it 10 years after the 2002 signing or 10 years after the build is complete?

Mr. Doerksen: Well, Mr. Speaker, with respect to the specifics of that question I don't know the exact answer. It is a 10-year contract, and we can provide more of the exact details that she has asked for in writing to the hon. member, and we will do that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Peace River/Fort McMurray Connector Highway

Mr. Friedel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the Minister of Transportation. We've heard a lot in the past months about using the P3 concept to facilitate capital projects in this province. A group of municipalities and industry stakeholders and consultants have expressed an interest in developing an east/west connector highway between Fort McMurray and Peace River using this concept. These folks have met with the minister on several occasions and have been received with interest and even some encouragement. They tell me, however, that when they approach department officials on this project, the responses are somewhat vague and that they feel they're getting a mixed message. I'm wondering if the minister could advise us whether this east/west connector highway is a reasonable candidate for a P3 project.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This particular stretch of road was studied this past year. The anticipated cost is about \$90 million. It is an important stretch of road to shorten trips to Fort McMurray from Peace River by many hours. In discussing whether the proposal of a P3 would be applicable to this particular project, I would say that the kind of public/private partnership that would apply to this will be similar to the Brazeau bridge, where a number of private-sector companies, mostly oil and gas, some forestry, came

together and said, "You know, we will share in the cost of this road; it will certainly reduce our operational costs over X number of years," and they'll do sort of a net present value calculation and come forward in a partnership of that sort. This would certainly move the project up on the general capital plan, especially when a number of private-sector companies come forward and offer some assistance.

Mr. Friedel: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker, and following up on his last remark: could he tell us more specifically, maybe, what this group could do to advance this project to a higher priority within the department and the overall capital budget?

2:20

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, perhaps I should use an example of what's presently happening on highway 2. There's a new interchange being built at Airdrie, and it's to deal with an ever-increasing amount of traffic because of a new subdivision. It would have been some time before a new interchange or an enhanced interchange would have been done on our capital plan, but with the developer coming forward and offering a million dollars toward the total construction of the enhancement of this interchange, certainly that moved it up significantly on the capital plan.

My suggestion is that we work together with private-sector companies and move this project on that kind of basis.

Mr. Friedel: My final supplemental to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: considering that P3s are somewhat innovative and depend on the private sector for a significant financial contribution, could the minister tell us what he's doing to ensure that the private sector is adequately involved in the development of the procedural guidelines for P3s?

Mr. Stelmach: The only project that we are proceeding with in a public/private partnership is the southeast leg of Anthony Henday Drive. Certainly, in developing the request for qualification, the request for a proposal, all those companies involved, whether it be in design, financing, maintenance, were involved in developing the proposal. I would suggest that the same holds true here.

This road would be not only good for industry but also an opportunity for the people living in that part of the province, the Peace River area, to get to Fort McMurray much sooner and, of course, participate in the excellent job opportunities that exist there today.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Prescription Drug Coverage

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Today Albertans learned about Kiernan Lang, a 22-year-old Alberta university student who is struggling with paying out of pocket for expensive cancer treatment drugs. It is this government's policy of making middle-income Albertans pay for medically necessary drugs that may leave Kiernan without enough money to attend university next year. This is not universal coverage. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. What is this minister prepared to do to help Albertans like Kiernan Lang who are being burdened by paying out of pocket for expensive, medically necessary drugs?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I can advise the hon. member, although he probably does know already, that eligible drugs that are used in the direct treatment of cancer are provided by the Alberta Cancer Board

at no cost to the patient. However, Albertans are responsible for the costs of prescription drugs that are used outside of hospitals.

Now, I'm not going to comment on the particular circumstances surrounding this individual. However, one of the things that is not covered entirely is the types of drugs that are associated with nausea, for example, while getting treatment for cancer, and as a result, Mr. Speaker, people who have the need for such drugs are generally covered by a person's supplementary health coverage.

Now, for Albertans without supplementary health coverage, Mr. Speaker, the Alberta government does offer nongroup coverage through Alberta Blue Cross to make sure that Albertans have access to an economical supplementary health benefits program. For a relatively modest monthly premium plan subscribers are covered for 3,700 different drugs under the Alberta drug benefit list. For individuals who are at lower incomes, there are subsidies for nongroup coverage available to those groups of people as well.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why is this government continuing with a policy that too often drives middle-income Albertans into poverty simply because they need medically necessary medication?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I've already outlined for the hon. member what program is in place for coverage of drugs. Those individuals that are subscribers under Alberta Blue Cross only pay 30 per cent of any eligible drug's cost up to a maximum payment of \$25 per prescription. That strikes me as being very good value indeed, sir.

Dr. Taft: To the same minister: can the minister indicate whether that plan is available to people who are diagnosed with a condition before they have the plan? Can they then get on the plan or not?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I'll take that question under advice.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Beef Exports to the United States

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. All cattle producers were very pleased and relieved to hear about the April 19, 2004, USDA announcement that removed all restrictions on the import of beef from cattle less than 30 months of age. However, that relief was short-lived after R-CALF, a U.S. protectionist lobbyist organization, filed a court challenge and received a temporary restraining order against the April 16 decision. Recent stories claim that the USDA and R-CALF have reached a decision to keep the restraining order in place. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Can she explain how this decision affects Alberta's beef trade with the United States?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, the April 19 announcement would have allowed bone-in beef and ground beef to move into the U.S. market. In fact, an easy way to identify what could move would be all edible parts, in essence, with the April 19 announcement.

The R-CALF request for an injunction, which was granted, was a huge disappointment to I think cattlemen on both sides of the border. R-CALF is a cattlemen's organization. They tended to be a litigious organization. Their name is cattlemen's legal defence fund, and we've experienced their litigation practices in the past. I think the largest disappointment is that this does nothing to further the

economic interests of the industry on either side of the border. However, having said that, Mr. Speaker, we live with the fact that this has happened.

The USDA apparently has come to an agreement with this group that they will not continue the plan to move bone-in beef into the U.S. Having said that, the USDA has also committed to putting out the final rule on the movement of live cattle and product from over-30-month cattle as soon as possible.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: can the minister tell us what the trade experts in her department are telling her about why and how R-CALF was able to get a temporary restraining order?

The Speaker: Well, hon. member and hon. Deputy Premier, this is an item that occurred before, I guess, a quasi-judicial grouping in the United States. What we're talking about now is a very subjective view about something here. So if the hon. Deputy Premier has a specific answer, give one, but if not, we'll move on.

Beef Exports to the United States

(continued)

Mrs. McClellan: Yes. Well, Mr. Speaker, all I would say is that R-CALF successfully argued that the USDA did not follow its own administrative procedures. That was the argument.

Of course, what the USDA have told us repeatedly in our quest to have the border opened was that it was important through this rule-making process that they do follow their administrative procedures, which I believe is why they've been very careful to go through the comment period and to review the comments and follow those procedures to avoid this happening again. Of course, Mr. Speaker, that rule is what we're all very anxiously waiting for.

We've had some optimistic comments from the visit of our Prime Minister with the President. The President has said that they want to see the border open as quickly as possible. The President has stated publicly that the opening of the border will be based on sound science, and, Mr. Speaker, we are confident from our analysis that sound science would dictate that that border should open to live cattle immediately.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: Madam Minister, can you tell us what the next steps would be or how we as a government can help our producers to overcome this last hurdle?

2:30

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, my understanding is that the temporary restraining order will stay in place until the U.S. publishes the final rule. We're working with our federal government, with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, with the Canadian embassy to resolve, of course, this troubling issue and to clarify how this restraining order affects our facilities in Canada, our slaughterhouses. But the ultimate answer in this is a final publication of a rule of a border opening based on science, and we hope that that'll happen very soon.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Ophthalmology Services in Calgary

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2002 the Minister of Health and Wellness approved an order to bring a pediatric ophthalmologist from Colombia to work in Calgary because there were no Canadian pediatric ophthalmologists available. However, the Liberal opposition has learned that not only were Canadians available; at least one of these pediatric ophthalmologists actually approached the Calgary health region to work in Calgary. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. How does the minister explain approving a part 5 designation to bring in Dr. Castro and her husband to work in Calgary when not only were Canadian pediatric ophthalmologists available; they were actually approaching, writing letters to the Calgary health region to work in Calgary?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I did answer this question in some detail on an earlier occasion with respect to the process of how part 5 designations are approved. If regional health authorities, through their heads of various departments, believe that there is a need to hire a physician with particular qualifications or a specialist designation, they give their best effort to go through a process by which they come up with the best person available for the job. They do seek to fill that position from among other Canadians, but should they not find a suitable candidate, then they make their best effort to find that individual from elsewhere.

In this case, Mr. Speaker, details elude me at this time. I'm caught by surprise by this hon. member's question, he having asked it before so long ago. Dr. Castro has come through a part 5 designation to provide important services to the regional health authority. Dr. Castro is also married to another Dr. Castro, who is also providing services to our public health system. I would refer the hon. member to my earlier responses, which provide more detail, he having advised me that he was going to ask the question in advance. I'd refer him to *Hansard* for a review of a more complete answer.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the minister's answer.

Will the minister investigate the potential conflict of interest that exists when foreign ophthalmologists are brought in to work at a private facility owned by the chief of ophthalmology for the Calgary health region while Canadian ophthalmologists are turned away?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, that's virtually the same question that he asked before, and I refer him to the same source of *Hansard*.

Dr. Taft: It's not at all the same question. We'll try differently. To the same minister: given that the minister has said in this House, quote, I have heard nothing but praise for the work that is being done by doctors Maria and Alberto Castro, end quote, will the minister release the results of a review undertaken by the health region into the work of Dr. Alberto Castro at the Holy Cross facility?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I'm not aware of any such report.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Beef Industry

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today the House of Commons standing committee on agriculture recommended to the Canadian Parliament that Cargill foods and Lakeside Packers, as well as another packer, be found in contempt of Parlia-

ment for failing to open their books so that Canadians would know whether or not they profited unfairly from the BSE crisis at the same time that cattle producers were going broke. My question is to the Deputy Premier and Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Does the minister still believe, as she reported on March 11, 2004, that Alberta meat packers did not profit unfairly from the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis? If she does not, why not?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, what we reported in the release of a document which was a review of pricing was that we did not find evidence that would suggest that there were undue profits made.

However, if the hon. member will just take his recollection a little bit further, what we did do and say was that the Auditor General was reviewing all of the programs that we provided, the \$400 million, 90 per cent of which went directly to producers, to ensure that those funds were indeed put out to the people that the program intended them for.

I was surprised this morning to hear on one of the newscasts that we had avoided telling people where the \$400 million went. I mean, nothing could be further from the truth. We have said consistently since the beginning of this that there will be a record of every cheque that was written to every recipient with the amount on it. However, I have resisted doing this before the program was completed, and as soon as that is completed, that will be delivered. Then people can see the facts and draw their conclusions.

As far as the issue with the packers and their information before the House of Commons committee, that is clearly outside of my jurisdiction and none of my business.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. If the packers indeed refuse to open their books for the Auditor General in his investigation, will the government support the Auditor General and take action to force the packers to open their books?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, you know, that is the difficulty with questions from this hon. member. That's speculative, hypothetical. There is absolutely no indication at all that the Auditor General has had any concern about getting information.

You know, it's bad enough when you raise questions about issues that you have some basis for knowledge, but to put that out there is totally, totally wrong and unfair. If the hon. member can show me that the Auditor General has said or indicated in any way that he is having difficulty in obtaining information and that that is hampering his investigation, bring it to this House. But to put that suggestion out there in the public with no basis in fact is absolutely wrong. It's irresponsible. However, it is in the manner that I have become accustomed to from that hon. member.

Mr. Speaker, this does no service to this Legislature or to the industry that is suffering from the worst devastation it has ever experienced in its history.

The Speaker: I'm going to recognize the hon. member for his third question, but it should be noted as well that the Auditor General is a servant of the Legislative Assembly of the province of Alberta, not the government.

The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: I appreciate that, Mr. Speaker.

Will the minister or will the minister not commit to encouraging meat packers like Lakeside and Cargill to open their books so that

Albertans can find out whether or not they have unduly profited by the BSE crisis?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, as you have clearly laid out, the Auditor General is an officer of this Assembly. The Auditor General is quite capable of managing his affairs, and he does not need interference, interjection, or assistance from me. If he does, if by chance he would want something, he would contact me, which he has not done. I am astounded by this line of questioning unless the Auditor General has contacted the hon. House leader for the third party. If he has, bring it forward. I'd be happy to deal with it.

Again, Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General is an officer of this Assembly. He will conduct the investigation in the manner that he should, and we will co-operate with him in any way we can to move this forward.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness to supplement an answer given earlier. Our rules are that once you do that, there's an opportunity for the individual who raised the question to you to ask another one.

Mr. Mar: Yes, sir.

The Speaker: Please proceed.

Prescription Drug Coverage

(continued)

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I took an earlier question from the hon. Leader of the Opposition. To the best of my recollection his question was: is this Blue Cross coverage available to individuals with a pre-existing condition? I'm advised that the answer is yes.

In further supplement, Mr. Speaker, with respect to copayment for nonhospital pharmaceuticals, I wish to indicate that there are copayments in the following countries for nonhospital pharmaceuticals: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and also the United Kingdom, sir.

Dr. Taft: That's fine. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before I call on the first of four hon. members to participate today, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to Members of the Assembly a family visiting from Botswana, Africa. Their names are Virendra and Poonam Miglani and their daughter Paawan. They're accompanied by Mrs. Prem Khurana, a friend of the family. I would now ask these guests, who are seated in the public gallery, to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Members' Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

MS Awareness Month

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. May is MS Awareness Month. In 1998, much to my chagrin, I was diagnosed as having MS. Family history, none. However, MS is very prevalent in certain areas or pockets within the province. Two come to mind, one being Lacombe, the other Barrhead, and I happen to live in Lacombe.

Known as the mystery disease, MS manifests itself differently in each and every person. The cause is still unknown. As such, finding a cure remains our number one goal.

I am more fortunate than some as I have what is referred to as relapsing/remitting MS; 97.8 per cent of the time with medication my disease is manageable. However, on occasion, when I least expect it or want it to happen, I wake up knowing that today is going to be an MS day or days. This is a time when I very much need the support, understanding, and co-operation of family, friends, and my employer. Not giving in only worsens the condition.

I have long been an advocate for those with MS or those living with someone who has MS. Presently I'm honoured to be serving as a member on the MS Society of Canada, Alberta division board.

I would like to praise the good work of the MS Society, Alberta division and the many local chapters, and I extend a huge bouquet to my wonderful, knowledgeable, hard-working neurologist, Dr. Mary Lou Myles, for all her good work related to MS and MS research.

Also, special thanks and kudos to our Minister of Health and Wellness as this will be year 3 that Gary, Nancy, and wee Mackenzie have willingly participated. Our minister will once again be biking on June 13 from Lacombe to Sylvan Lake for those with MS. All pledges on his behalf will be gratefully accepted.

This month and next there will be numerous Super Cities walks for MS as well as bike tours throughout the province. As honorary spokesperson for the Red Deer Cities Walk I urge you to participate. Monies raised will go to needed research and programs.

Like the increase in incidence of diabetes, the numbers for MS are also on the rise. Please help us in the fight against multiple sclerosis. Only by working together can we make a difference.

Thank you.

The Speaker: As the hon. member had mentioned the name Barrhead in her particular statement, I would like to advise all Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta that the volunteers in the Barrhead area have an annual horse ride and in recent years have raised over \$250,000.

Energy Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Energy deregulation has been an absolute and catastrophic failure. Not only has it cost Albertans \$8 billion; it has also deprived children of swimming pools, left seniors out in the cold, and robbed many small business owners of their livelihoods.

The indoor pool in Ryley was forced to close its doors to children in September because utility costs soared by 175 per cent. Two Hills closed its pool in August because its energy bills rose from \$1,500 per month to \$5,000. Fortunately, the pool has since reopened.

The Caslan community hall is on the verge of closing because sky-high utility bills have zapped all of the hall's extra funds. The Lac La Biche Regional Recreational Board posted a deficit of \$30,000 last year, 80 per cent of which was directly due to huge energy costs. The curling club in Elmworth was forced to close after its utility bills skyrocketed from \$4,000 per year to \$12,000. The same worries have plagued a twin hockey arena in Edmonton whose power bills have doubled to \$2,400 thanks to electricity deregulation.

An employee at the Grande Prairie Salvation Army has publicly stated that there are seniors who are, quote, sitting out there right

now who have had their gas and power cut off because they can't afford to pay the high rates, end of quote.

A business owner from Vulcan had to close one of his two businesses because he couldn't afford the \$1,200 utility bill each month.

A number of businesses in Pincher Creek have closed their doors because they could not meet the cost of lighting and heating their stores. Several of these owners found a lawyer to discuss the idea of a class-action lawsuit against the Alberta government. Their lawyer believes such a lawsuit may have merit, stating, quote: this whole deregulation has been such a disaster, and people have suffered, end of quote.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

New School Initiative

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the past five years intense residential development has been occurring in my constituency of Calgary-West, as in many periphery areas of Calgary and other locations in Alberta. The schools in the western new growth area of Calgary-West are and were very overcrowded while many in the eastern older part were very underutilized, resulting in a low utilization rate for my sector, far below the 85 per cent average required before new capital funding would be granted by the province for the construction of new schools. Sixty per cent of K to 12 students were and are daily leaving the new growth area to attend schools in the underutilized area and beyond.

Feeling the frustration of many parents, I started the New Schools Initiative, or NSI, Committee in October 2002, inviting key stakeholders – my alderman, CBE trustee, Calgary Catholic trustee, parents, the private sector, and the Department of Infrastructure – and they all attended regularly. They came because they cared about the needs of students.

All the committee work was focused on how to acquire many new schools as soon as possible using approaches other than the traditional. It focused on all sources of funding, the minimum physical infrastructure to ensure a quality learning environment, life cycle of infrastructure, public/private partnerships, and the model school as a cornerstone of the community, incorporating compatible facilities and services.

Mr. Speaker, there were many learnings because of NSI: that key stakeholders need to work with each other, that each key stakeholder brings a valid perspective to the table, that we all need to acknowledge roadblocks we create, and that we need to be flexible to bring about good change. The NSI has recently concluded its formal life, but its learnings and new relationships will carry on with each member of the committee.

Thank you to the Premier and the ministers of Infrastructure and Learning for their support and to the committee members, being Shelley Allchurch, Doug Balsden, Lawrence Bortoluzzi, Ellen Breen, Guy Buchanan, Lois Burke-Gaffney, Craig Burrows, Barry Day, Mike Irving, Mary Lou Mendyk, Dave Michie, Darlene Nyegaard, Carole Oliver, Stephen Stewart, and Lisa Hofmeister, my assistant in the Calgary-West office.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Comprehensive Arts Ticketing Service

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to recognize a new initiative for not-for-profit arts groups developed by Pump-house Theatres Society in Calgary. What started as a way to improve

Pumphouse's own ticketing service grew into a bigger vision for the Calgary arts community.

Making use of traditional ticketing providers has always been too expensive for small and medium-sized arts groups. Pumphouse was able to strike a deal with RepeatSeat, a Calgary-based global entertainment company, to implement a comprehensive ticketing service system for the benefit of the arts community at large. As part of the free service groups will also enjoy 35 hours per week of telephone sales and 24/7 Internet sales as well as full event reporting and data management.

2:50

Traditional ticket services frequently charge both the patron and the presenting group a fee for their services. Pumphouse Theatres will provide this service on a cost recovery basis with the cost passed down to the arts patron in a reasonable per ticket service fee.

The program developed by Pumphouse is a way for arts organizations to invest their limited financial resources into their art, where it belongs. We applaud the leadership and spirit of community demonstrated by Pumphouse Theatres.

Thank you.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to present a petition signed by 76 members from the Lethbridge Firefighters Union No. 237 petitioning this Legislative Assembly to support Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm presenting today a petition signed by 116 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to "pass legislation that eliminates health care premiums."
Thank you.

head: **Notices of Motions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday I will move that written questions 67, 70, 74, 82 through 88 be dealt with on that day. There being no further written questions at this time, there are none to stand and retain their places.

Secondly, I'm also giving notice that on Monday I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 88 through 105, 108 through 123, 128, 134 through 143, 146 through 162, 164 through 168, 174 through 180, 183 through 205, and 207 through 210.

Thank you.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Bill 33 Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave today to introduce Bill 33, the Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

[Motion carried; Bill 33 read a first time]

Bill 34 Income Trusts Liability Act

Mr. Hlady: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 34, the Income Trusts Liability Act.

In the past few years there's been significant growth in the area of income trusts. As this type of investment becomes increasingly popular, the need to protect investors also grows.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta is leading the way with providing legislation that will protect investors of income trusts. Without this legislation there is the potential for an investor in an income trust to be held personally liable beyond their initial investment. This makes it a particular challenge for income trusts to attract smaller investors and some institutional investors that have restrictions relating to liability.

Mr. Speaker, this bill will help stimulate further investment in income trusts in our province and will have a positive effect on our economic growth.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 34 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 34 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Bill 35 Companies Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 35, being the Companies Amendment Act, 2004.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 35 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 35 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to table today responses to written questions 1, 4, 5, 15, and motions for returns 21 and 43.

Additionally, it is a pleasure to table responses to questions raised during Agriculture, Food and Rural Development's budget estimates in Committee of Supply on April 21, 2004. Mr. Speaker, I have forwarded those responses to the individual members prior to this tabling.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table with the Assembly today the requisite copies of the special areas trust account audited financial statements as of December 31, 2003.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms Calahasen: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Today I have to table five copies of the 2003 Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal's annual report. The Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal is an effective dispute resolution mechanism for the Métis settlements of Alberta, and this annual report demonstrates the good work the board accomplished in 2003.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to table the required number of copies of the agendas and summaries of discussions from the meetings of the New Schools Initiative Committee for Calgary-West for the period of November 4, 2002, to April 8, 2004. The committee was comprised of many key stakeholders including my alderman, public and Catholic school board trustees and their planning representatives, parents, private-sector developers, and Infrastructure officials, all committed to addressing the need for new schools in high-growth areas.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Two tablings today. The requisite number of copies of results of studies of 19 million U.S. teleworkers in the teleworking industry. Two quick highlights include AT & T savings of \$550 million due to reduced office expenses while seeing major productivity increases. Also, a finding important to Albertans, every single day now 590,000 tons of carbon monoxide, 31,000 tons of nitrogen oxide, and 39,000 tons of hydrocarbons are kept out of the air by telecommuters not driving to work any more in the U.S. That much every single day.

My second tabling is the requisite number of copies of a parking ticket which I got last Sunday. The parking rate was \$2 an hour from a machine. I was a few minutes late. The ticket is for \$37.45 if paid within seven days but \$69.55 if paid on the eighth day or thereafter, which strikes me as just under 100 per cent interest per week. I'm not sure if these parking tickets are legally enforceable or not, but they are being handed out to Alberta citizens.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Further to the questions asked in question period by the Leader of the Official Opposition, I'm tabling the appropriate number of copies of automobile insurance quotes for a 1997 Dodge and a 2002 Volkswagen owned by the Member for Edmonton-Riverview and his family. This includes quotes from a private company in Alberta and also from the Manitoba, ICBC, and Saskatchewan public auto insurance schemes.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table for the information of all hon. members of the Assembly The King's University College graduation program from May 1 of 2004. This is The King's University College's annual graduation ceremony. It is a vital institution in the community of Edmonton-Gold Bar. This year's convocation address was delivered by Dr. S. Keith Ward, vice-president academic, who in two-months' time is retiring after 25 years teaching there.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there others? Well, then, hon. members, let's sit back, relax, and enjoy the hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is truly an historic day today. I'm very pleased to stand before you and, as required by the Alberta Official Song Act, table with you and all members of the Assembly the report of the Alberta Official Song Committee.

Before I make the tabling of that report, which includes the committee's recommendation, I wish to introduce the composer of the song that has been selected. May I therefore ask you, Mr. Speaker, to ask for unanimous consent to . . .

3:00

The Speaker: Just proceed.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, sir. I am very excited to introduce to you and through you, Mr. Speaker, to all members of the Assembly the composer extraordinaire from Rivière Qui Barre, Alberta, Mary Kieftenbeld. If she would please stand. Mary, of course, has the honour of being the composer of the song that has been selected by the Official Song Committee. She's joined today by her husband, Ed, and by their children Jeremy, age 10; Kagen, age 8; Haley, age 6; and Emma, age 5, who are probably just as excited as Mom. I would ask all of them to please rise and receive our warm thanks. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker, as part of this historic tabling all members should be reminded that we had 335 entries for the Alberta official song contest, and that represented over 100 communities throughout the province of Alberta.

Our Official Song Committee members need to be briefly thanked. In particular, I'd like to thank the MLA for Calgary-Fort, whose idea it was to have an official song. Also, I'd like to thank other members who served on the committee: the MLA for Edmonton-Centre, the MLA for Calgary-Bow, the MLA for Edmonton-Meadowlark, and the MLA for Barrhead-Westlock, that being yourself, Mr. Speaker, who was an ex officio member of the committee.

Other members included Barry Allen from the Alberta Recording Industries Association; Carol Dand from the Arts Touring Alliance of Alberta; Kelly Jerrott from Music Alberta; Neil MacGonigill from the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada; Gary McDonall from the Alberta Recording Industries Association; Gladys Odegard from Music Alberta; Judy Reeds from Arts Touring Alliance of Alberta; and Wayne Saunders from the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada. They did a great job and a very difficult task indeed.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the act requires me to table the lyrics and music of the song recommended by this illustrious committee. The lyrics, of course, are contained in the report, but the music only exists on a CD as submitted by the composer. Therefore, I'd like permission to play that CD, which is of course the demo version of the song as submitted by the composer. I need to remind individuals that this is not necessarily the final version, obviously; it is the demo version only. Other forms of the song will be professionally produced and made available in sheet music to suit a variety of purposes including choirs and bands and orchestras and small combos, reflecting different genres and styles. Nonetheless, today with the kind agreement and permission of the song's composer I'm privileged to play for you an excerpt from the song selected by the Alberta Official Song Committee.

Mr. Speaker, on behalf of all Albertans may I say thank you to the committee, and congratulations to the composer, once again. Here now is a sample of a song called *Alberta*, as recommended by the committee and which the Legislative Assembly will be asked to endorse as Alberta's official song to be used in conjunction with centennial celebrations in 2005.

[An excerpt was played from the song *Alberta*, recommended to become Alberta's official song]

Mr. Zwozdesky: And there's just a brief sample.

[Applause]

head: **Projected Government Business**

Ms Blakeman: According to Standing Order 7(5), I would ask the Deputy Government House Leader to please share the projected government House business for the week of May 10 to May 13, 2004.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Monday, May 10, in the afternoon under Introduction of Bills we'll deal with Bill 32, the Appropriation Act, 2004, then we'll be following that with Written Questions and Motions for Returns and private members' public bills. In the evening we'll deal with motions other than government motions, followed by second reading of Bill 31, Highways Development and Protection Act; Bill 33, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 34, Income Trusts Liability Act; Bill 35, Companies Amendment Act, 2004; and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Tuesday afternoon under Government Bills and Orders under second reading we'll deal with Bill 32; Government Motion 17, the Alberta official song motion; Committee of the Whole for bills 31, 33, 34, 35. Tuesday evening under Government Bills and Orders under second reading we anticipate dealing with Bill 32 and Committee of the Whole and/or third reading with bills 31, 33, 34, 35, and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Wednesday, May 12, in the afternoon in Committee of the Whole we anticipate dealing with Bill 32 and otherwise as per the Order Paper. On Wednesday evening under Government Bills and Orders, Committee of the Whole, we anticipate dealing with Bill 32.

On Thursday afternoon under Government Bills and Orders, third reading of Bill 32. We're expected to deal with Government Motion 7, that was agreed to on February 18, regarding the spring sitting duration of the House, and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

Thank you.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order. Before we proceed, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm delighted to see the turnout of people that has joined us in the public and the members' galleries today. There are a few people representing organizations that I would like to introduce. I'm assuming that

they've joined us. If they have, please rise when I say your name. Otherwise, I know that they'll be joining us within minutes.

Pat Brownlee is here representing COSA, the Coalition of Seniors Advocates. Pat would have come from Calgary. I see her standing. Sandy Reid is here from the Alberta Council on Aging. If she could please rise. I believe Ron Ellis, who is the new chairperson of SUN, Seniors United Now, is also here. Albert Opstad, who is the former chairperson of SUN, Seniors United Now, is here, and I think that Hilda Campbell, chairperson of the Seniors' Committee of the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, Edmonton branch, is also joining us. I would ask the Assembly to please welcome those people representing those organizations.

Thank you very much.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Seniors

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, as per our Standing Orders the first hour will be dedicated between the hon. minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member may participate.

The hon. Minister of Seniors.

3:10

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm extremely pleased to be here doing the estimates on the last day of estimates and very pleased to see the galleries full. We haven't had that for any department yet, so thank you very much, each and every one of you, for attending. On that note, Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask all of the seniors who are here for the estimates to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly so that the members can have a good chance to have a look at you folks who are interested enough in the estimates. Could you all please rise and receive the welcome of the Assembly. Thank you very much for coming.

I have some department staff here also whom I would like to publicly thank, but I won't go through the process of introducing them individually. They, as we all know, are responsible for the functioning and the good management of the government.

The 2004-07 business plan will see the ministry continue to develop and deliver services, programs, and information that contribute to the well-being and independence of low-income seniors, persons in need of housing supports, and clients of the office of the Public Guardian. Last year, Mr. Chairman, Alberta Seniors' mandate was expanded to include the office of the Public Guardian, homeless shelters, and the room-and-board and housekeeping portion of long-term care facilities. Our 2004-07 business plan reflects the full integration.

In 2004-05 our ministry business plan budget is \$470 million. That's an increase of \$73 million from 2003-04. This includes funding for the Seniors department and the Alberta Social Housing Corporation. This increase will enable us to enhance benefits for low-income seniors and accelerate the development of more affordable housing in the province. I'll go into more detail on these initiatives later in the presentation.

The 2004-05 operating budget for the Seniors department is \$406 million; \$377 million, representing 93 per cent of the department's budget, is being targeted in the form of grants and programs to assist low-income seniors and low-income Albertans in need of housing supports.

My ministry's business plan supports the fourth pillar of the government's strategic plan: "Making Alberta the best place to live, work and visit." We work to achieve this by providing supports to those people who are in greatest need, including low-income seniors,

people in need of housing supports, homeless people, and people who are unable to make their own decisions. By doing so, we can ensure that Albertans will be self-reliant to the greatest possible extent and that those unable to provide for their basic needs will receive help.

As we work towards that vision for Albertans, my ministry will ensure that the programs, services, and planning initiatives we deliver are effective and, most importantly, sustainable. We envision a vibrant province where Albertans live with dignity as full participants in society and experience the best possible well-being and independence.

We're working towards fulfilling this vision through the administration of three core businesses: firstly, providing services, programs, and planning for seniors and the aging population; supporting the provision and ongoing management of basic housing and emergency shelter for lower income Albertans; and thirdly, providing programs, services, and supports to enable appropriate substitute decision-making. For each core business we have identified several goals to ensure effective and sustainable program delivery.

Our 2004-05 budget identifies the resources to deliver the programs. Under our first core business \$245 million has been identified to provide services, programs, and planning for seniors and the aging population. We have three goals. The first is to ensure that "seniors in need have access to financial supports that enable them to live in a secure and dignified way." The ministry has two major financial assistance programs that support this goal: the Alberta seniors' benefits and the special-needs assistance for seniors.

The Alberta seniors' benefit is an income-based program that provides low-income seniors with monthly financial benefits and calculates Alberta health care insurance exemptions. Approximately 185,000 seniors, or 56 per cent of the 331,000 seniors, receive benefits under the Alberta seniors' benefit program. Of those seniors, cash benefits are paid out to over 126,000. Approximately 165,000 seniors in Alberta, or roughly half, pay no health insurance premiums, and 20,000 pay partial health premiums. The average annual cash benefit through Alberta seniors' benefit is \$1,248 per senior and \$1,512 per couple.

The budget for Alberta's seniors' benefit program has been increased from \$155.6 million in 2003-04 to \$198.8 million in 2004-05, an increase of some \$43.2 million. This increase will be used to assist low-income seniors residing in long-term care facilities and to address volume increases in our program. Ten million dollars of the increased funding will be used to provide further assistance to seniors most in need. We're finalizing details on how this funding will be used. An announcement will be made prior to commencement of the new seniors' benefit year on July 1.

The special needs assistance for seniors program is an income-tested program that provides lump sum cash payments to help low-income seniors who do not have the financial resources to fund one-time or extraordinary expenses. The program helps seniors meet the costs associated with special needs such as medical, optical, dental, and the cost of essential minor home repairs. Last year this program provided assistance to some 36,000 seniors. In 2004-05 the special needs assistance budget totals \$33 million and includes a \$6 million base budget increase.

The reality is that we are committed to ensuring that the financial needs of Alberta's low-income seniors are met. Our maximum Alberta seniors' cash benefit of \$2,820 is available to seniors living in apartments and lodges and is the highest in Canada. We provided funding in addition to this to seniors living in long-term care facilities. Our income eligibility thresholds for single seniors and senior couples are also the highest in Canada. The special needs assistance program for seniors is the only one of its kind in Canada.

Mr. Chairman, my ministry's second goal is to ensure that information on our programs, services, and initiatives for seniors is accessible, accurate, and consistent. This information is provided in several ways, including telephone information services, the seniors' information services offices, publications, and the ministry web site. In 2003-04 the Alberta Seniors web site received almost 1.1 million visitors, almost 300,000 more than in the previous year.

An information package is mailed to all Albertans three months before their 65th birthday. This package includes an application form for the ASB program and informs the senior of the availability of the Programs for Seniors information booklet. This booklet contains information on all programs that are available to seniors. In addition, if seniors have not applied for the ASB program by the third month after their 65th birthday, we follow up to ensure that they are aware of their eligibility to apply.

Last year the seniors division responded to approximately 153,000 calls, and the eight program support officers had more than 55,000 personal visits. Information is also provided through publications such as the Seniors Programs and Services Information Guide as well as through participation in cross-ministry and external planning and program initiatives. Seniors already contribute significantly to the Alberta economy. As this sector of the population continues to grow, seniors' contributions will become even more important to the provincial economy.

3:20

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The third goal of our business is to ensure that "government policies, programs, and plans effectively anticipate and respond to the needs of current and future seniors." As noted earlier, my ministry is now responsible for the accommodations component of long-term care. Since taking over this responsibility, we have established good working relationships with long-term care operators, regional health authorities, and Alberta Health and Wellness to ensure that operators remain accountable for the services that they are providing. We are also working towards the development of a fair spectrum of room and board support options ranging from lodges through supportive living to long-term care. This will help ensure a balanced distribution of financial support throughout the system.

Our second core business is housing services. Two hundred and twenty million dollars have been identified to fund the ministry's second core business, which is to "support the provision and ongoing management of basic housing and emergency shelter for lower-income Albertans." This \$220 million is used for programs and services such as the lodge assistance program at \$15.7 million; grants to seniors and community housing providers, \$16.9 million; rent supplement, \$15 million; the Canada affordable housing agreement, \$51.2 million; special needs housing and home adaptation program, \$5.9 million; support to the homeless, \$17.1 million; operation of the Gunn centre, \$2 million; and debt servicing costs of the mortgages we have on our portfolio applied about \$41.3 million.

Our housing portfolio provides emergency shelter for the homeless and subsidized housing for low-income families and individuals and persons with special needs as well as affordable housing. For low-income seniors we offer affordable and appropriate apartments and supportive housing facilities that provide additional services such as meals and laundry.

Currently the ministry supports 40,000 housing units that house approximately 68,000 Albertans who need assistance in accessing appropriate and affordable housing. As our first goal we work to ensure that our housing portfolio is efficiently and effectively

managed and appropriately utilized. To achieve that, we are working on a number of initiatives, which include targeting our systems to those in greatest need and fostering community-based solutions.

Alberta Seniors provides support to over 10,000 community housing units that provide low-income families with safe and affordable housing. In recent years operators have been faced with increasing operating deficits due to increased costs associated with utilities, taxes, maintenance, operations, and administration. In 2004-05 we're allocating an additional \$1.9 million to community housing providers and seniors housing providers to assist with the increasing costs. With these funding increases a total budget for community and seniors housing providers will be some \$16.9 million.

Last year we introduced a new way of allocating the funding for the lodge assistance program. The new formula provides management bodies with a per diem grant of \$5.50 for each low- and moderate-income resident in a lodge unit. An additional subsidy of \$7 per unit per day is provided to existing lodges with 33 or fewer units. This new formula enables us to more effectively target and increase our assistance to low-income seniors in need of housing supports. At this time about 87 per cent of the 8,800 lodge units are occupied by lower income seniors. We're allocating an additional \$1.5 million to the lodge assistance program to accommodate an increasing number of low-income seniors in the lodge system. The additional dollars will bring the total budget for lodge assistance grants to \$15.7 million.

As I mentioned earlier, my ministry now provides grants to assist homeless shelters. In 1997-98 provincial funding to homeless shelters amounted to \$6.9 million. Provincial funding now totals \$17.1 million for homeless shelters and homeless initiatives. An additional \$2 million is allocated to the Gunn centre shelter for men with mental health/addiction problems. Yet, even with an increase of almost 150 per cent in funding over the last six years, capacity pressures on the homeless shelters continue to increase. We are undertaking a review of the emergency homeless shelter system to ensure that our shelter system is most appropriately and effectively targeted. We're also working to foster independence among homeless people by creating long-term solutions such as transitional and affordable housing.

The second goal of this core business is to ensure that the "development of a range of housing for lower-income Albertans is supported by the ministry." To address Albertans in need of housing, my ministry works in partnership with housing organizations, community organizations, and other levels of government to identify local housing solutions.

Alberta Seniors signed a bilateral agreement with the federal government in 2002 to fund the development of affordable housing in Alberta. We are currently on track to provide \$134 million in total funding under the Canada/Alberta affordable housing agreement. To date \$58 million has been allocated by the provincial and federal governments for development of approximately 1,300 affordable housing units in Edmonton, Calgary, Fort McMurray, Fort Chipewyan, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Red Deer, Cochrane, Brooks, Leduc, Rocky Mountain House, and other northern remote communities.

An Hon. Member: Rocky is not a remote community.

Mr. Woloshyn: Rocky is not remote, but it's one of the ones we helped.

Some of these units, Mr. Chairman, are directed at seniors. For 2004-05 provincial and federal governments have committed a further \$51.2 million. With that I can assure you that Alberta's

commitment to the creation of affordable housing for low-income people is unparalleled anywhere in Canada. As a matter of fact, Mr. Chairman, I understand that we are the first province to have units occupied under that program.

We are also recognized for our efforts to direct our program at a broad range of Albertans in need. The federal government has announced an extension of their support for the affordable housing program. We're currently having discussions with the federal government about extending the Canada/Alberta affordable housing agreement and providing additional funding beyond 2005-06. Mr. Chairman, if you can believe it, we are doing such a job of this that the federal government actually approached us to extend that agreement.

The third and final core business is to provide services and supports to enable appropriate substitute decision-making for those unable to do so for themselves. We do this through the Public Guardian program. Over \$5 million has been allocated to support this goal to ensure that the best interests and well-being of Albertans unable to make decisions are served through appropriate and timely substitute decision-making.

In carrying out my ministry's mandate in 2004-05, I can assure you that my ministry will continue to do an excellent job, and we will ensure that anything we can do will result in programs that will be efficient, effective, and sustainable in the future.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I will entertain questions regarding the budget estimates, and if I don't answer all of the questions – the ones that are relevant to the budget – I will have staff reply to them from *Hansard* in the future.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I don't know that anyone has noted it, but today there has been accommodation made in the members' gallery for captioning for those that are hard of hearing, also called hearing impaired. I wanted to particularly note the assistance of one of my staff members, who went to work on trying to organize this when it was brought to her attention, and that's my constituency manager, Penny Craig. Penny, at my suggestion, contacted the Speaker's office and the Clerk's office, and it went from there. When I walked in today, the Clerk informed me that in fact it was all happening, and I can see them joining us in the gallery. So thank you to the Speaker's office and to the Clerk's office, and, I'm sure, visitor services. I wanted to make special note of my staff's effort to accommodate. In fact, it was possible to do, and I'm glad to see it.

3:30

Now, I have a number of issues that have been brought to my attention by various seniors' organizations in the province, Mr. Minister. What I'd like to do is sort of go through those comments and get your reaction to them, and in some cases I have specific questions that are arising from that. I also have a series of very specific financial questions and then some more general questions, and then I'd like to go on to the homeless and housing section at the end. So I'll probably have to get two or maybe three at-bats to get this all in, and hopefully I'm pitching strikes.

The first group that I have on my list here is CARP, the Canadian Association of Retired Persons. What I did was send an e-mail out to all of the seniors' groups, and I said: "This is the day that the debates are going to take place. Please come if you would like to hear them, and if you have questions you would like me to raise or concerns you want to put on the record through me, please corre-

spond.” They did. So that’s where this is coming from. They’re fairly recent concerns that are being raised for the minister, just so he doesn’t think I’ve dug back into my dusty files to two or three years ago. This should all be within about the last six weeks.

The issues raised by CARP in particular were around health care premiums and when they could expect to see the elimination of health care premiums for seniors. Of course, the minister is well aware that the Liberal opposition’s stance on that has been to eliminate health care premiums for seniors and indeed for all Albertans; that’s an unnecessary tax for us.

I’m aware that the minister has been on the record saying that he’s in favour of that as well, and a number of the organizations and I are wondering what we can do to assist the minister. Are there particular ones among his colleagues that could do with some helpful phone calls to move them down the path of supporting this initiative to eliminate health care premiums? Would a letter or cards or e-mails be helpful? What could we do to help move your more recalcitrant colleagues along? The minister is on record as saying that he’d like to see it, but we don’t see any movement. So it’s not him; it must be somebody else. Who can we lean on here?

Also raised was the elimination of the seniors’ extended health care. Now, the minister will respond that, in fact, for low-income seniors they did move some money from that program into the special-needs benefit, and I will come back to some more specific questions on that a little later on.

There were issues raised around long-term health care costs. Of course, we all know that last June, just about a month after the House rose, there was an announcement that long-term care rates would increase between 42 and 48 per cent. This has in fact caused hardship to a number of seniors. I’m interested in whether the government has done any studies or follow-through to determine whether in fact this did, as the minister claimed, turn out not to be harmful to people. I’m seeing the opposite, and I’m wondering if the minister, with his larger resources, has done anything to study this in a way that we could have a look at. So if he could share that with us.

Also, concerns raised about threats to Blue Cross benefits. Now, over 65 there is a special Blue Cross package which is provided to seniors, but for those senior couples where one spouse is under 65, then you have one of them paying, usually cash, for their Blue Cross coverage, but the partner who is over 65 is not. So eliminating the nonprofit tax exemption for Blue Cross and having those rates go up is going to affect senior couples because it’s going to affect the one that isn’t a senior. What’s the minister’s comment to that? Has he looked at it? Does he understand what the repercussions of that could be for seniors in Alberta?

SALT is the Seniors’ Action and Liaison Team, a very active seniors’ advocacy group, and their mandate flows beyond seniors. They have a reaction to the budget that was announced in late March. Just a couple of their concerns are around the government continuing to say that health care is not sustainable. They quote a number of other studies back, noting that spending on health care has actually decreased over the past 10 years: 5.3 per cent of GDP in ’93-94 and 4.9 per cent of GDP in ’03-04. They’re using information from the Canadian Institute for Health Information and information from the government of Alberta.

They continue to be concerned about using the pretence of unsustainability to argue for curtailment of services and for greater public-sector involvement. They have concerns around private, for-profit surgical facilities, P3s to build hospitals and other public facilities, and private, for-profit insurance companies.

They also raised the issue of automobile insurance and its effect on seniors. I would like to have the minister comment on what work

his department has done. What was his presentation to the all-party government committee that looked at automobile insurance rates and setting that grid? What was his input on behalf of seniors in Alberta to that committee? What effect of the institution of the government’s policy on automobile insurance does he expect to flow back to seniors? I’ll come later to some more pointed statements about that, but I’d like to know what work his department did.

SALT also raises the issue about failing to eliminate health care premiums. They also raise some social justice issues.

Seniors United Now raises the concern about exemption from health care premiums.

They also raise the loss of the program that seniors used to be able to apply for around a credit or a reduction in school property taxes. That continues to be a real concern for seniors that are trying to stay in their own homes. With the increase in electricity rates and other utility rates, including telephone costs and the increase in the property tax rate, more and more seniors are finding it difficult to age in place, which is supposedly one of the goals or aims of the government, to facilitate that. So the government appears to be working against itself in helping seniors or creating conditions where seniors can stay in their own homes and continue to have independent lifestyles.

Seniors United Now also raises the concerns around reimbursements for prescription drugs, eyeglasses, hearing aids, and the cost of dental. Again, that’s around the extended health benefit program, particularly optical and dental benefits.

They also raise the loss of the renters’ assistance program, which essentially was the other side of the coin, the equivalent to the property tax rebate available for homeowners. The renters’ assistance applied to those that were renting their accommodation.

SUN notes that the cost of living since ’93-94 has gone up by 25 per cent and that the cost of health care premiums has increased by 37.5 per cent. They also raise the question of what we can do to help the minister lobby his colleagues to get them on-line.

In ’92-93 seniors’ benefits paid by the government were 7.7 per cent of total revenue collected by the government. Eleven years later the seniors’ benefits paid by the government were 5.9 per cent of total revenue collected. That’s significant because we’re doing significantly better than we were then, but they note that seniors are worse off in the actual dollars and the value of those dollars has decreased. So it’s a double whammy for them.

They raise concerns about seniors liquidating their assets to be able to have enough money to continue. So that’s part of that issue around: they can’t stay in their own home because of all of the costs.

3:40

Now, the Alberta Council on Aging is not specifically an advocacy organization. Well, they’re not an advocacy organization; they provide information and programs and services to seniors. But they did do a very good study which was released on March 8, 2004 – International Women’s Day, I might note – and that survey looked at a number of things including the cost of utilities and what people were paying, how many of them were paying more, less, or the same, and raised the issue of insurance and also long-term care and caregiving.

What really struck me was the section about what was affected. In order, starting from the most to the least, of the things that seniors had to forgo, the most was social activities. So at the very time in their lives when they think they might be able to have more leisure time and more fun and catch a movie, maybe go on a trip and visit the grandkids, treat themselves to a round of golf or a facial or whatever, the very first thing they’ve got to cut out is social activities, and a significant number of the people responding did in fact

drop their memberships in various social clubs and that kind of thing.

The second thing affected was transportation, followed by food, followed by health care. Now, what does that mean? Well, it means that where there were supplements that had been recommended by a doctor that are not prescription and therefore aren't covered, those would be taken out. Maybe somebody delays getting newer, better-fitting dentures or getting their prescription for their eyeglasses updated. Well, what does that matter? That's just good thinking to put that kind of stuff off.

Well, I would argue that it isn't, in fact, and that it has a long-term cost effect on our health care system. People that can't see as well are more likely to trip or misstep and fall and cause injuries which would end them up in the hospital. If you don't have properly fitting dentures or your teeth aren't good, you're not going to be eating the kind of healthy fresh fruit and vegetables that we are told every day we should be eating. Well, all of a sudden you're not; you're looking at day after day after day of oatmeal and things like that because you can't handle the other kinds of food any more. So this is not contributing to an independent lifestyle that's full of choices and health.

Another thing that I found very useful from the survey from the Alberta Council on Aging was the comments that came back from people that were recorded. I'm not going to mention any of them, but I just did pull out a couple of them where they're talking about accommodations. Comments made: "My house needs repairs but I can't afford it." "Sharing a house with family." "Older home, needs insulation. Very cold in winter." "The cost of utilities is going to limit our time in our own home."

Why does this matter? Because eventually they're likely to end up in a facility that is subsidized or completely paid for by the government's budget, so we're better off all the way around keeping people independent and in their own homes. Having comments like, "This is going to limit their time in their own home," is not a positive mood.

Here's one about the property taxes: "A \$400 school tax increase in one year with no one in school. These tax increases will cause many seniors to lose their homes."

Around the utilities they say, "Privatization of utilities affects low-income pensioners the most." "It's a shame that we have to bundle up in our own homes and live in dread of the utility bills." "The cost of power itself is not so bad; it's . . . the extra charges they put on." Someone else has taken in a boarder to help reduce the costs.

Car insurance. This is where I was asking: what was the minister's contribution to the automobile insurance debate? Was he advocating for senior drivers, and how was he advocating for senior drivers? This is one of the issues where I'm getting maybe a phone call a month from a senior – but that's representing a lot more seniors that aren't calling – that are saying: "You know, I had one little accident, and now I'm cut off. What gives here? I was a perfect driver. I'm in good health. I've got a car in good repair that isn't too old. One fender-bender in the shopping mall and that's it; I'm out." So there's a question here of what's happening with insurance companies that are looking, I think, to dump older drivers, and that's why I'm interested in what the minister has done to advocate here.

This jeopardizes in a couple of ways. I think it jeopardizes seniors' independence. You know, they're using their vehicle to go out and go shopping, to get to doctors' appointments, but a few other things, Mr. Minister, things like volunteering in the community, from which we all benefit. Maybe they're going out and looking after a neighbour or a friend. Again, we all benefit from that.

There is a cost to giving up that transportation and having to rely

on others. Perhaps they have to change doctors that they've had for a long time because they have now got to get one on a bus route. It's different choices like that that you don't want to have to be making in your senior years. Not that seniors aren't vital and able to make all of these decisions, but it's not what they were expecting when they got to retirement.

Here are comments on car insurance. "Don't know why, I have a clean driving record, never any claim or traffic ticket." "Can't really afford it but need my car for shopping and doctor's appointments." "Have no choice; I need my car to go to work." "Have to pay it – there is no other transportation in rural areas." "They are punishing us seniors – give us a break!" So those are the issues raised around that.

Long-term care. "The 40% increase in the cost of [long-term care] is too much – our pension has gone up only 2 or 3%." This is another comment: "[Long-term care] is a big burden. My husband has Alzheimer's and I do not get any pension for 2 more years." So there's an example of a couple with one senior in care and one who's not a senior yet.

Can he update us, please, on the status of involuntary separation? The federal government was very up front. It was on their web site what the deal was to qualify for that. In other words, that's a program where you point out your circumstances, that one of the couple is now in care somewhere and that it's not voluntary, that you didn't want to be separated, that the other one is still at home, and that's going to cause a financial burden, especially if they continue to be considered as a couple with the limits that are in place for a couple's income rather than looking at it as one person's income.

I'm also interested in how someone in Alberta finds out about that program or whether they can apply and have effect through Alberta? I know that the feds were very up front about it. It was easy to find the information. I haven't found that so, but I'll admit that the last time I looked would have been in the fall, so six months ago. Can he give us an update on where we're at with that involuntary separation program?

I'll note that at the minister's party's convention there were resolutions to take actions on seniors. Do we have any indication from the minister on how that resolution from his party is going to flow through into government policy, whether we can expect to see any action that's taken in the fiscal year that's been presented to us as a result of those resolutions?

As an update from last year's estimates, Mr. Minister . . . [Ms Blakeman's speaking time expired] I'll have to come back. I'm sorry.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'll try as best I can to answer these concerns. I'll start with long-term care. I'd like to point out that when the long-term care rates were reviewed and changed, at about that same time, the housing portion that we're dealing with, what portion the individual pays, was transferred over to my department. We agreed on the rates, and, yes, they were significant increases.

However, as part of the process there were some things that were made mandatory by the providers as a part of these rates. One was cable television, another one was wander bracelets, a third one was all incontinent supplies, and the fourth one was bathing as required. The hon. member I'm sure at one time would have had concerns in these areas. As a part of it we didn't get into the discussion of whether it was health or housekeeping, if you will. We said that these things must be done, and that was a part of the whole process.

3:50

Along with that – and I think this is extremely significant – two or

three other things happened that improved it for all folks in long-term care. Number one, seniors on the seniors' benefits program for the most part – I'd like to say each and every one, but there's always an exception somewhere. Not only was the increase in the cost absorbed by our increase in supports to them, but we also ensured that they would have \$265 of income left, the same as if they were in a lodge. The rate at \$42 a day may sound excessive, but it fits us in at about the second lowest or third lowest in the country. That's significant.

The significant thing about how we operate the programs is that they are all income tested as opposed to asset tested. So if a person owns a home or has other properties, we don't ask to delve into that. That is not the case in Atlantic Canada, where it's all asset based.

However, there is the concern that was identified by some of the comments, and that is when you have couples split between the two facilities. We do within our program whatever we can to treat them as singles to maximize their benefits, but in addition to that, we have had very good success by having the people with problems go directly to the operators, and then we'd work out solutions, and very frequently Alberta Seniors staff would get involved.

There are some that we haven't been able to capture that weren't necessarily seniors. You pointed out the one there, for example, not on pension yet. If that particular individual has not contacted Seniors, please have them do so. We may be able to help them, and if we can, we certainly will. That's just a comment. I can't tell you where that will go.

What has happened in there is that we've ensured that the people know what they're getting and we know what the rates are. What I think we have to keep in mind is that what the tenant pays is only a portion of the cost. The average care cost, I believe, in addition to this is some \$95 to \$100, which is paid for by Alberta Health, and it flows through, obviously, the various health authorities.

That number in and of itself, I believe, translates into some \$650 million annually for health care for people in these facilities. As you know, even though they have the same residual income as in a lodge, they get all their drugs and whatnot covered while they're in the facility. But, again, we do have a concern over the people who on an individual basis don't meet the system, and those we want to hear about to see what we can do to assist them.

The long-term care one I think has worked out extremely well. We are also putting in a monitoring process, working with other departments, to ensure that we can get some consistency, as I indicated in my comments, in the overall operations.

The other part. To avoid a catch-up jump – and that's what this was. We can quote percentages wherever we want, but this increase was necessary as a matter of catch-up. We were having some not-for-profits, if you will, that were on the verge of closing their doors if they weren't able to access some funding from somewhere, and the majority of that funding flowed from my department through to the individuals. It also goes to our philosophy of helping the individuals as opposed to doing the block dumping into the building. So as it shakes down, that will work out I think very well.

The whole area of insurance is one of concern. It's a concern on liabilities, it's a concern on volunteer groups, it's a concern on minor hockey groups, and it's a big concern in car insurance. I will say this much to you: the seniors as they pertain to that and as you heard in question period here earlier, when the Premier made a reference to seniors and that whole insurance package – I don't want to comment on that too much until it plays its way through. We'll see what we have. At that time we'll go.

Certainly, my people have been working with them to identify the needs of seniors, and there are other things to do with seniors. How often should they have medical tests? How do you get a disability

sticker? All these other things that work into a part of being a senior and a driver. I certainly advocate very strongly on behalf of all seniors, and we want the ones who are able to and can to drive for as long as possible for the very concerns that you listed there.

One of the other themes that you brought forward was property taxes. That certainly is a concern. If you add up the 2 and 3 per cent a year over 10 years, there has been a significant jump, far more perhaps than what the program before could be.

We are currently looking at – and I don't know our outcome because we have to get some co-operation from the municipalities. I want to look at some way of stabilizing, freezing, looking at assistance for senior homeowners, and that would be applicable across the board. So that's in the works, if you will.

With respect to some of the other assertions, I have to point out something here. I'm sure you're familiar with our card on the programs that we have. When you look at a renter or person in a long-term care centre and in a lodge, one is supplemented far beyond what shows on the card here. A couple that is renting a home, if they are at the bottom end of the income and the maximum seniors' benefits, could get somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$4,200 a year plus their premium exemption plus they have, if they are eligible, special-needs assistance.

I think it's important to note that Alberta seniors do not pay for Blue Cross premiums – it's premium-free – and in that you have drug coverage. People quickly say, "Oh, it's 30 per cent," but I think it's important to note that that 30 per cent is a maximum of \$25 per prescription. Some of the prescriptions are in the hundreds of dollars. People on low incomes can also apply for assistance through special needs if they can't afford these \$25 ones, if you know what I mean. Also, there are a couple of other little coverages in there.

The cost to Alberta Health, I believe, on Blue Cross payouts, on the premium-free portion last year was some \$365 million. That doesn't show up in my budget. That would show up in the health line as one of the supports for seniors. You add to that the \$650 million that is paid for long-term care and then the home care and the others.

On the health side of it, yes, we'd like to see improvements. I'm certainly a strong advocate for it. We're tossing ideas around in the department on how we can address the issue of glasses and dental specifically. What you pointed out in your comments with respect to having good dentures and having good eyeglasses is a health issue; I certainly agree with you one hundred per cent. That's something that we would want to see happen, and we'll be working on these kinds of things. Whether it will come to fruition or not, I don't know.

I think the important thing to note in here is that we do focus on the people who are most in need, which brings us to the whole idea of thresholds and where they cut in. Would I like to see them go higher? Yes. We've been able since I've been in charge of this portfolio to lift them quite significantly from time to time, but if you look at where we cut in, for example, for a partial premium exemption, a senior couple, if you will, who earn less than \$37,881 pay no health care premium. That's quite generous if you compare it to other parts of society where we deal with thresholds and whatnot.

The other comments that you made with respect to sustainability of health care and that. As you well know, we're looking at that, and hopefully we can make it sustainable. We're not going to go after and wholesale hurt seniors' programs. I don't think any of my colleagues would be willing to support anything like that.

4:00

I believe, for the most part, that answers, in general terms, most of

the issues that you brought forward. If I have missed some there, you may repeat them.

The thing that I'd like all people to understand: our programs are income, not asset, based, and that's very significant. That means that we're not asking people who have the hard assets to liquidate in order to pay their way. So I would say that, overall, if we can deal with things like property taxes, utilities, insurance rates – yes, those are problems. We're trying to address all those issues. Hopefully, with respect to the seniors end of it, I'll be able to do something more with respect to the property tax issue as it comes.

Certainly, you're right: I'm advocating on behalf of the seniors with respect to health care premiums. We have a process that we have to go through, and I'm just going to keep on pushing, and if you can help me push, I'll thank you for it.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Thanks very much. Thanks, Mr. Minister. I'm going to just launch into the next round of questions.

Is there sufficient information now available to establish a baseline for the percentage of eligible seniors receiving Alberta seniors' benefits? That was what the minister put in a letter in response to a question from me during last year's debate, and the reasoning was that there wasn't sufficient information that had been gathered to establish the baseline. Do you now have it? And has the ministry been able to assess the extent to which Albertans in need of low-cost housing are able to access it?

I'd like to look at some specific questions about line items in the budget, so I'll refer the minister to page 322 of the estimates book, vote 2.2.3. The special needs assistance grants have dropped this year. They're almost \$6 million less. Can the minister give us a reason as to why that's happened? Are there fewer people requesting it, or was there something being offered that's no longer being offered? Could I have the details, please, on what's been reduced or what's been eliminated?

Under vote 3.5.2, which is on page 323, there's a million dollars less for homeless support there. Again, could I get the details on why that's dropped from \$18.134 million to \$17.109 million? A million dollars less. Why? I think the minister has heard from me enough that there needs to be more support for the homeless. Maybe he's moving money between line items. I don't know, but I'd like the explanation, please.

Still on page 323, vote 3.5.3, could I get an explanation about what the other grants are. They're receiving \$7 million less than they were last year. What are those other grants that are no longer there? It just says "other grants" and doesn't give us any description, but that program is basically gone. It has gone from \$7,860,000 down to \$410,000, so it's gone. What was it? Could I get the details on that, please?

Vote 3.5.5, still on page 323. There's a quarter of a million dollars less for the home adaptation program. Now, this is one, I'm assuming, that seniors could have accessed specifically. Could I get some details, please, on why money has been reduced there? It was \$1,025,000, and it's gone to \$765,000, so a quarter of a million is gone. Why? I would've thought that that program would be in even greater demand these days, not less demand, so why have those gone down?

On page 330 in the estimates book I note that we've got six more full-time equivalents, six more staff in the department. Could the minister tell me what those staff are doing, please, and describe which program they're allocated to?

I also would like to look now at the business plan, page 377, the

performance measurements. This is part of the question that I started with. Under the performance measurements we've got a new baseline, and then the targets for everything, '04-05, '05-06, are to be determined. So how is this a useful performance measurement?

You know, I'm getting frustrated. The government actually did do a good thing with their financial program and particularly with the performance measurements. This is the eighth budget that I've now debated. What I see is that the departments tend to not build upon their performance measurements so that they're a useful management tool and a useful tool for the opposition and for members of the public in evaluating the performance of the department. What happens is that either we've got satisfaction polls that are used as performance measurements, which are not useful at all; we get performance measurements that are a hundred per cent achievable, which aren't useful; or we get what I'm seeing here, which is a constant renewal – or a constant jettisoning is more accurate – of the performance measurements.

So it's always: well, we're working on a new baseline, and we haven't established the targets yet. Then the next time I look, well, now they're developing a new one. So you hardly get it into place before it's been dumped. Its usefulness as the tool it's meant to be is not there. That one is specific to the "percentage of seniors provided with the opportunity to apply for Alberta Seniors Benefit." What are you trying to achieve there, and when is it going to be a useful measurement for us?

You know, with the performance measurement further under goal 2, "satisfaction with information services," you're at 90 per cent right across the board, so is that giving you useful management information?

A couple of other things that arose out of comments that the minister made, one that came from a note that has come into my hands, a reminder to remember Jennie Nelson's death in continuing care. Now, that doesn't fall under the minister's jurisdiction except that she was a senior and he is the delegated minister in charge of seniors. What programs or changes has the minister's department looked at as a result of the death of Jennie Nelson in care?

There were also some issues around the facilities review committee of Bethany care in Calgary. I acknowledge that this is not the minister's responsibility; nonetheless, I'm expecting that the minister is doing some work with his staff to look at what can be done to make it safer. Or how is he advising his colleagues? There are always intergovernmental, interministry committees that are all working together on something, so what work is this minister doing to try to address the care of seniors in nursing homes and long-term care facilities?

I've got some rebuttal for the minister. I always find it interesting because the minister gets up and goes, "we've got the best program in Canada." But I've heard from others that go, "we've got the best program in Canada," particularly in the north. So I'm wondering if the minister has ever done an apples-to-apples comparison of exactly what programs and services are offered and done a direct comparison between those things, and if they're not the same, then they get cut out of the mix. I suspect that Alberta may well do some things better or offer more benefits but that they may not be offering the whole package that others are offering.

4:10

Some things to make note of. Seniors' benefits in British Columbia, for example – they have a property tax reduction: \$450 for those under age 65, \$745 for those over age 65. Although B.C. is the only other province that charges health care premiums – tsk, tsk; for shame, for shame – their health care premiums are lower. Finally, a senior's driver's licence: in British Columbia, again, \$17

for five years; in Alberta, \$64 for five years. That was brought to my attention by Mr. Nykiel from COSA, so thank you, Mr. Nykiel, for those notes. I'm interested, of course, in the minister's response to that.

This was in your opening comments, Mr. Minister. You talked about that you were looking at room and board situations and trying to be balanced and fair. I'm wondering: could you give us some more details on what you are working toward here or what you're looking at? I'm hoping that I'm not going to have to deal with another summer where there's a whopping increase in rates somewhere. It certainly made my summer more exciting than I was expecting it to be; let me put it to you that way. I'm looking for the details on what that statement you made actually means and how it shakes down.

I have a question as well on specific funding for shelters for abused seniors. Now, there's a specific shelter attached to the Kerby Centre in Calgary. I'm checking on whether their funding is remaining the same, going up, or going down. Can I get an answer on that? Also, in Edmonton I believe the Society for the Retired and Semi-Retired funds some spaces. It's not a specific shelter; it's some apartments, I think, or spaces where abused seniors can find temporary shelter. That funding always seems to be in jeopardy or comes up when they've run out and they're looking for assistance again. Can I get something from the minister that indicates that that funding is secure and that that group doesn't have to keep going to the media to try to get assistance?

Can I get a specific breakdown, please, on the \$134 million that he mentioned regarding the new housing? He said \$134 million. Then he talked about \$58 million that has already been allocated, and it gave us 1,300 units. The \$58 million: is that both pieces, the feds and the province together? He's saying yes to me. So the province's piece of that is actually \$29 million. He's talking about another \$51.2 million in '04-05, so I'm assuming then that the province's piece of that is going to be about 25 and a half million dollars. If I can just get confirmation on that.

Finally, the issue around property taxes. I think this has put seniors in a difficult position. There are two issues here: one is the property tax issue, and one is the school tax issue. I hear from a lot of seniors that talk about: why are we paying a school tax when we don't have any kids any more? I will argue back against them and go: because it's a societal responsibility. If we want, you know, children in our society and if we want people to have families, we all pitch in on that; we all accept some responsibility, particularly around educating children. I'm more than happy to pay my school property tax in order to have children well educated in this province.

But the property taxes themselves put the municipalities in a squeeze because they're the only ones that have to keep actually raising their property taxes to get enough money to cover what they need. There's a huge infrastructure deficit that's been created by this government, the provincial government, in reducing all of the grants that went to the municipalities in the last 10 years. That created that infrastructure deficit that the cities are now left with, so they have to raise their property taxes. The school property tax is the provincial government's piece of that. I'm aware that it puts the squeeze on seniors, but I also have to point out that the municipalities are doing the best they can there with a rather lousy hand that they've been dealt by the province, plus the school property taxes are entirely flowing through from the province, so it's a squeeze, but it's not the municipalities' fault.

The increase to the Alberta seniors' benefits. We went from \$177.4 million to \$198.8 for Alberta seniors' benefits. I think that this is a volume increase, that you're expecting more people to be subscribing to this. He's shaking his head. Okay. He's going to

give me the numbers then. I would also like to know how many seniors the ministry is forecasting will receive a partial health care premium subsidy, how many seniors the ministry is forecasting will receive a full health care premium subsidy, and how many seniors the ministry is forecasting will receive full health care and the cash? So how does that break down by the numbers? I'd like to get that information, please.

I'm going to move on to the homeless shelter questions. Last year the minister initiated a shelter intake form for homeless shelters to track people using their facilities. Now, the forms were taken out of use very quickly, but I'm wondering: how much did the development and introduction of these forms cost, and what is happening with the project? I note that I do have a written question on this, but I'm trying all possible avenues open to me, and this one came open first, so I'm going to ask it through this venue.

The minister admitted at a government standing policy committee meeting last year that the progress the province has made to address remote housing issues wasn't as good as he would have liked. On February 18 of this year the province allocated \$2.5 million to remote housing. Does this contribution fully address the problem as the minister would have liked, or is there additional work that can be done here, and what is it specifically?

I'd like to know how much the ministry has paid for its department to be hooked up to the SuperNet or any other SuperNet fees, connections, hookup services, Internet provider service fees that this ministry has been involved in paying. I'm also interested in how much the ministry is going to pay to the SuperNet service provider, Axia, to maintain any connections that they have.

Last fall the Minister of Seniors proposed charging homeless people a fee of up to one-third of their income, if they had one, to stay at a homeless shelter. The proposal also suggested that money would be saved for the client in order to pay for a damage deposit on an apartment down the road. Well, my question to the minister is: what made the minister believe that withholding funds from an individual would magically create skills and abilities that they did not previously possess? The minister was quoted at the time as saying that this was going to encourage responsibility, and a few other things were on the list. I'm wondering: what made him think that? What had you looked at that made you believe that this was going to help these people achieve these things? Was there a study he looked at? What?

Also, the minister released on July 6 last summer a news release about the Sunalta Shelter. He talked about an accountability component for shelter operators and clients. Can the minister please expand on what he was talking about there? I believe that the Sunalta Shelter is again slated for closure. Can I get some background on that, please? Why is it closing? Can we get a cost-benefit analysis? Why is the province choosing to close that down?

4:20

Finally, what is the minister doing with regard to housing mentally ill people? I know that there are some that receive some accommodation, but I'm wondering whether there's anything upcoming that we can look forward to for housing of the mentally ill.

I think I've just about used up my second 20 minutes. I appreciate the opportunity, and I look forward to the responses from the minister.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much. Again, I'm going to have a hard time getting all this in, but I'll do the best I can. I'll start at the back and work upwards.

With respect to Sunalta Shelter, that thing is going to close whether I like it or not. There's a permit from the city that expires in about a year or so. The shelter, in my mind, is not appropriate. It's an emergency shelter. It's not appropriate because it's a room this size. It's got good showers, and they treat the people well there, but there are mats on the floor; lines and lines of mats. It is indeed what it's called, an emergency shelter.

I still believe – and I was hoping that I would get better co-operation from shelter operators – that if you want to get an individual to become self-sufficient, one of the pitfalls they run into on leaving a shelter, if they have some small source of income, is that they go from paying zero for room and board to having to hit a damage deposit and the first month's rent. That becomes a big impediment.

Remember this: that suggestion is not novel. Mustard Seed in Calgary charges; the Salvation Army charges. So the idea isn't novel, and I'm saying to the operators: where people have the money, why shouldn't all the operators charge it? Not to cut down our costs but to help the individual in some way, to move them through. At the same time, as you're aware, through our programs we've been working with the federal government on transitional housing. Some of it has been successful; some not so successful.

Moving now to the accountability of the shelters. We have to determine how much support should be coming for a shelter and who should be paying for program support. If you look at the variety of services provided and the variety of costs, it's virtually everywhere. What we want to get is something that we can put a finger on. We have not been successful in lowering the demand. I was pleased last winter that in Edmonton we never hit a crisis point. In Calgary we didn't, but Calgary went ahead and contracted a few more temporary spaces.

One of the problems we have is that every time there are spaces that are temporary, suddenly people want to make them permanent. There would be no end to the number of spots we would have. We have to work some way to get these people out of the shelters. Maybe some will never be able to leave – I don't know – and we'll have to deal with those differently. Certainly, that whole business of the shelters is something we're going to continue to look at.

With respect to the form that was there, it was a good form. It was run by FOIP and everybody. The only reason I cancelled it is because we were getting the information in an alternate way. The cost of it was staff time. The actual cost was zero. A couple of staff put it together and ran it by the proper processes. So whatever the staff time would have been in terms of a portion of their day: I don't know what that is. I couldn't even give you an answer. The actual cost expended to develop a form out of a budget line is zero. Did some staff work on it? Yes. It was just a simple kind of thing, because a lot of the questions asked were already being asked. It wasn't a great big revelation. So the cost of the form was quite frankly a bit of staff time and not very much at that. Remember, we got into these shelters April 1, and that form issue was in May, June.

One of the issues surrounding the shelters, from the minister's point of view, was simply the reporting back to government. Some operators were reluctant to do so. They chose to try to give us numbers three months old through other bodies that dealt with them. I felt that if we were going to be responsible, we had to ensure that we knew what we were doing. I was very pleased this year. Virtually all of the shelters have been very good on their daily reporting, as I indicated to you a couple of times in the House in question period. So we'll continue to work on that.

There wasn't actually a decrease in the allocation for the homeless shelters; a slight increase, as a matter of fact. What you're seeing, the difference in the spending: we had Westgate; we had a couple of

other costs in there that I hope won't be there. I'll be very honest with you. I don't intend on increasing the homeless shelter budget. I don't intend an increase in the budget. Whether I will be able to stick with that or not, I don't know, but when we're spending more on homeless shelters within a five- or six-year period than we are on our whole lodge assistance program, there's something out of balance socially here. We want to find out what it is, and we want to find a way to help these folks end up in homes so that they aren't in the shelters.

Part of the affordable housing program is now being directed more and more at getting sizes of rooms that people on low incomes can afford and are happy with. As you're probably aware, there's one converted restaurant for sure that was done on 95th Street, I believe, that was targeted at very, very low income. So that's sort of more or less what's happening there.

The low-cost housing accessibility is variable. We've worked the program, and it seems to be working very well to where the communities determine. For example, an affordable level of rent may be different in Fort McMurray than it is in Brooks.

The projects have been going very well. I gave you the numbers of what they were, but I would like to point out something that's rather interesting. Edmonton has had the most projects and the most amount of money by far. That wasn't because of any kind of effort from the department's or the minister's side. They came forward with the projects, and I have to commend the various groups that did that. As you know, some of those were directed at people who needed extra help, and whether the programming came from the Mental Health Association or somewhere else, the whole idea is that we want to get a housing stock there that becomes, as I said, sustainable.

What I didn't mention in my opening comments was the fact that the federal program is a 10-year program for affordability. Alberta's program is 20 years. We are double the timeline on it, in other words, before any kind of funding goes into these projects, whether it be municipal, not-for-profit, or private developers, some of which are doing a very good job, incidentally. Some of the lowest rents coming up in the next cut of Edmonton projects are with a private developer. But those things must remain affordable for 20 years. I think that that's reasonable. By then properties depreciate, and you have a lot of other things to look at.

What we're trying to do with the room and board – you have a variety of levels of need. You have your basic lodge, and you have supportive housing, assisted living, designated assisted living, long-term care facilities. We want to establish a room and board pattern that makes sense, that doesn't arbitrarily go here, there, or elsewhere. The Alberta Senior Citizens' Housing Association, ASCHA, has done quite a bit of work with us on that. We'll see. There may be some little variances in rent depending upon the services you get.

Then it opens up the debate of how much an individual is responsible for. One of the ways we're addressing that, as I indicated in my comments, is that we've switched our funding from bricks and mortar to individuals, which means that the support follows the individuals, so depending on where they go, the money goes with them, which is also looking to the future. Hopefully the day comes, as more people with private incomes come on the market and less support is required, if you will, when these lodges will then be able to rent at whatever is a reasonable rate and the government would not be supplementing in lodges people who don't need supplements. I don't think anybody can argue with that.

You made reference to performance measures. I'm frankly of the mind that if you have a performance measure, you should make it work. We were having difficulty with those, so rather than trying to put a smoke and mirrors thing, my staff put the facts down. We

haven't figured it out yet. When we figure out a good measure that will work, we'll have it down there. Until then, I'm not going to have something on there just for the sake of having it there.

4:30

With percentages it gets to be difficult. Some things measure themselves, if you will, and there are some areas that are very difficult. Satisfaction: if it's under a hundred per cent, I'm not happy. Am I ever going to get to a hundred per cent? No. But the idea is to push and push and push as close as you can get.

So when you see that the performance measures are not in there, we're not slacking off; we're just trying to find a better system. When the better system comes in, it will be brought through there. I would imagine that you could go with that one.

You made reference to the tragedy in the nursing home, and I'd say this. In any private home, institution of any kind, whether it be a senior or nonsenior, a person with a disability, there's no defensible excuse for something like that happening. I wouldn't ever want by that statement to intimate that there was any kind of criminal intent. Somebody did something wrong.

One of the suggestions that has been coming forward – and the Capital health authority I think has moved a little bit on this one – is that the water that goes into these tubs should be on what they call a blender, where you can't go above a particular temperature no matter how hard you try. That's a very good first step.

Another suggestion which I would have is that they have a floating thermometer that doesn't have numbers on it but has visual colours – if the needle's in the red, you don't touch it; if it's in the green, it's safe – in addition to blenders and so on to make sure that an error can't happen, because if it's mechanical, it can happen. That's one of those tragedies that's there.

We're trying to work with the operators on best practices. I don't like to comment too much because I'm not privy to all of the circumstances surrounding how that happened. I will only stand by the statement I'm making here and now: it should not have happened. We certainly will be looking at ways to ensure that it doesn't reoccur anywhere else, and Alberta Health I'm sure would be just as adamant about that as I am.

Remote housing: that's an interesting one. We have a real challenge there, a real challenge – and we're working on it – and that's to make the thing accessible and also sustainable, and we're making progress there. Am I happy with the progress to date? I'm happy that we've got some good initiatives going, and we've got I believe an allocation there yet, that we'll have more money going in. Hopefully, we'll get a system going that has a higher degree of sustainability in it than some of the remote housing currently has. There are a lot of issues surrounding that one that make it awkward to go for. One of them is even the ability to pay rent, if you will.

The increase to seniors' benefits – you were right. I shook my head, but you were right. Part of it is a volume increase; part of it is picking up of the difference that we received and allocated for the support for seniors in long-term care. Part of that will go there. Ten million of that has not been designated. That was what I was referring to. We will be targeting that into the special-needs program to a specific area. We've got some particular things in mind but have to work it through the system. That will be announced prior to July 1, a \$10 million infusion somewhere in the special-needs program. But the way I am, I won't fudge it. We've got some good ideas of where it should go, and it's going to help a specific group somewhere in the special needs that need the help.

Your comments with respect to taxes. I don't accept your side comments about how terrible the provincial government has been to the municipalities, but I suppose we can agree to disagree on that.

However, the basic issue that we share is that rising taxes, whether it be education or municipal, are becoming too burdensome on fixed-income people, whether they be seniors or not. On that, I'm totally in concert with you. We're trying to work out some sort of a program that will address that very issue. How successful we'll be I guess time will tell.

The whole idea of property taxes impacting people's ability to stay in their homes is a concern for me, and you will see things like market value assessment, all these things enter into it. So we have to find some mechanism that is workable and ensures that people can in fact stay in their own homes and that taxes aren't the driver for them to get out.

Axia. I understand that we don't give Axia anything. I'll give you a bit of expansion on that answer. If I'm wrong, I apologize, but I believe that we don't have anything going into Axia, and we're not really into that whole business. We'll try in the written answers to give you an explanation because, quite frankly, I don't know all of the answers on that particular question to do with the Internet, and I'd just have to get it for you anyhow. But I'm pretty dam sure Axia is not a part of it.

I think that's most of the things that you asked me, hon. member. We'll be looking at *Hansard*, and if there are relevant budget items that we've missed, we'll be glad to give them to you in writing.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I know that in estimates members of the government don't often participate in the debate, but from time to time I think it's really important that we do and that we also put our thoughts on the record.

I understand perhaps more than many in this room what the role of opposition is in a parliamentary democracy and how they have the obligation and the responsibility to oppose because it's that opposition that strengthens the legislation that the government will impose. It's often said that the opposition will have its say and the government will have its way, and that's the way the parliamentary system works. So from time to time we just have to sort of sit here and bite our tongue and say: gosh, that's just not fair. But that's the way life is, and that's the way it works.

I first want to recognize the work that this minister has done in this portfolio and, reflected in this ministry, the good work that's being done at the service level by this ministry. Generally speaking, when people are in need and address this ministry, the need is very often acute. People are frightened, concerned, very, very vulnerable. When these people connect with the government, to whom they are looking for comfort and security and direction, that has to be done with sensitivity, and from everything I've heard, this department has met that obligation and met it well. Thank you.

Now, unlike the opposition, who are able and capable and very good at hooking up with a specific interest group in order to promote a specific cause, which is the way it's done, and a specific group who may or may not have a specific interest, in this case seniors, who have been represented by various seniors' organizations here, ensuring that their voices are heard, that their interests are heard – they know that this Legislature listens not only to their voice but must listen to every other voice in society and then aggregate interests. That's what our responsibility is: it's to aggregate interests in the common good. So that's what we're charged with doing. It's not as if there is an infinite amount of resources available. We have to do with what we have, and we have to make the best choices long term.

That brings me to the heart of the comments that I wanted to put on record, Minister, and that is this. Next month I'll be 62.

An Hon. Member: How old?

Mr. McClelland: Sixty-two. In three years I'll be 65. So the question is: do I become entitled because I'm 65? That's the elemental question. Does entitlement come as a result of age, or should public funds go where they're needed? Is want the determination or is need the determination?

4:40

Let me illustrate it this way. The opposition has made mention and seniors' groups and seniors individually have made representation to me with regard to the extended health care program in which every senior because they were 65 years of age was eligible for a hundred dollars for glasses, dentures, whatever it might be. This was a nice program, but if seniors had independent health care insurance or if they had other insurance, that insurance paid net of the hundred dollars which was to be paid out of the common tax base. So there we were paying our premiums to get the insurance to cover it, and the insurance company would pay, as they're wont to do, net of the hundred dollars that they would get.

Now, what about the senior that didn't have any coverage at all? That senior would get the hundred dollars, but what happened if the senior didn't have the other \$400 to get the dentures? They'd have the hundred but not the \$400 and would be nowhere.

So the point is that if we make the distinction for public benefit based on need not want, then what has happened will happen, and that is that the senior that needs the \$500 will get the \$500, get the service they require. It's a question, then, of ensuring that we get the best results for the money spent or the money that's available.

That brings me to the notion of health care premiums based on age. Now, I'm on record as suggesting that health care premiums are a tax. They're a regressive tax, and I don't think that we should have health care premiums for anybody in Alberta. We have to pay it. We all know that we have to pay it. But do people somehow because they are age 65 all of a sudden become unable to pay? Wouldn't it make more sense that the capacity to pay health care premiums, as long as we've got them, is based on need, not on age? Doesn't it make sense that a young family trying to get by have just as much need of support as someone that is post-65 but better off, substantially better off?

I suspect that intuitively seniors understand that as well because many people that are seniors have grandchildren. Somehow we who are grandparents know that there's a magical transformation that takes place. There's a concern for our grandchildren that seems to transcend the concern that we have for our children. It's entirely different. I think it's fair to say that the majority of seniors are just as concerned with the ability of their grandchildren and other grandchildren to have the same opportunities in life that they have enjoyed and that the transfer of wealth is not intergenerationally from one generation to another.

That's the problem with the Canada pension plan. It's not interprovincially unfair; it's intergenerationally unfair. Someone in my age group would have paid into the Canada pension plan something in the nature of 80 cents for every dollar I'll get out of it if I live to an actuarial age. Someone 20 years older than me would have paid something in the order of 50 to 60 cents. Someone starting off today would pay into the Canada pension plan a great deal more, 10 per cent of their income, 5 per cent from them, 5 per cent from their employer, unless, of course, they were self-employed, and then it would be 10 per cent, or around \$3,500 a year, for which after 40 years they would get something in the order of 80 cents for every dollar they put in, with not one cent appreciation of capital. Not one cent. That is a great proportion of the amount of money that young people can put away for their own futures.

We have a societal responsibility to do what's fair. We absolutely must in my view do something to ensure that seniors are able to stay in their homes and not be inflated out of being able to stay in their homes. People who have done everything right in their lives – they've put their kids through school; they belong to the community leagues; they've built the community – find themselves, because we're living longer and healthier, living beyond their capacity to survive on what they've put away.

It's kind of like having your boat tied to the jetty, and the water's coming up, and you're going to be swamped. We've got to be thinking about how we can hold seniors harmless from the numbers that eventually will get them because of inflation, and maybe it means freezing property taxes on seniors. We've talked about that often because that would be a good way to ensure that seniors can stay in their homes, and the property taxes would catch up when the home is sold, just like they do in California.

I don't think that most seniors, or seniors that have the resources, begrudge the school tax that goes into paying for future generations. It's part of our social responsibility to each other. Even if we don't have children, even if we don't have grandchildren, our social contract one to another is for our society, and that includes educating future generations because it's future generations that build the country for the future. It's how we renew ourselves. That's why families and children are so important, and that's why we have community.

I know that there are other people that want to join in this debate, and I know that there are not many questions to the ministry in my comments, but I thought it was really important that we put this on the record, Mr. Chairman, because I am often contacted by seniors full of umbrage. They think: my God, look how we're getting screwed, and you're doing it to us; look how badly off we are. But when I explain what is actually taking place, I have yet to have hear one single individual say, "Hey, wait a minute; I didn't understand that. Well, of course I agree." You know something? It doesn't matter whether we're younger or middle or seniors, we've all got a stake in our society. I really do think that what we are doing together is going to result in the kind of society that we want.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Before I call on the minister to perhaps reply, I wonder if we might have consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Chair: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I have the honour this afternoon to introduce to all members of this Assembly someone who is seated in the public gallery, whose son perhaps is better known to us than he, but we are very honoured because he is here in Edmonton to be the guest speaker tomorrow evening at a fundraising gala for early literacy and intervention programs in conjunction with Capital health and with the school boards in Edmonton. He's going to speak at the Magic Moments Gala tomorrow evening. He has been accompanied here at the Legislature by our Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms, Mr. Ed Richard. He is also accompanied by his friend Mr. John Wilson, who was a neighbour of his in Brantford, Ontario, and who now resides just north of Spruce Grove. So I would ask everybody in this Assembly to extend the warm welcome to Mr. Walter Gretzky, who is seated in the public gallery. Please rise, Mr. Gretzky.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Seniors (*continued*)

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to the estimates on the Seniors ministry. I want to acknowledge the presence of seniors throughout the afternoon on both sides of the House, the members' gallery and the public gallery. It's nice to see citizens taking interest in debates which deal with their tax dollars and their benefits and their well-being.

4:50

Mr. Chairman, I just want to quickly make a few observations on the business plan I looked through. I remember that several years ago, a little over three years ago, when this ministry was established following the last election, the minister spoke with high hopes about his ability to advocate on behalf of seniors. I just notice that the word "advocacy" or the responsibility of this department to advocate on behalf of seniors has simply disappeared from the text of the business plan for the Ministry of Seniors. I want to make note of it, and I suppose the minister will perhaps respond as to why it is that the advocacy role of the department is not only perhaps downgraded but simply is no longer spoken of in the business plan.

Another quick observation on the business plan, Mr. Chairman, that I want to make has to do with the issue of long-term care and the radical increases, ranging from 40 to 50 per cent, that were introduced some time ago and have hit seniors very hard. They were introduced, I guess, in last October or September. We've been hearing with increasing frequency the hardships that seniors who use long-term care facilities have been forced to endure as a result of this, but one justification that was made when this massive change in long-term health care payments was introduced – this justification was used both by the private providers of this care and also by this ministry – was that additional charges are justified to guarantee and to deliver enhanced quality of long-term care.

I find in the business plan absolutely no mention specific to any performance measure that is specially designed to deliver on this promise that the ministry made, that it is committed to making sure that the additional funds that will be raised, although they would result in economic hardship will also deliver, in turn, enhanced quality of health care to seniors who use long-term care facilities. Where is the performance measure indicated in the business plan which reaffirms the commitment of this government and this ministry to follow up on that undertaking that it gave and the justification that was offered by you to increase those very, very unjustified and unpopular huge long-term care charges at the time? So that's the second question related to the business plan.

I want to now return to this afternoon's question period, Mr. Chairman. When I asked the first question, I was advised that the question that I asked is appropriately to be asked of the Minister of Seniors, so he might want to take an opportunity to answer the question. I'm going to read into the record the preamble and then the question that was put to the Premier, but on the advice of the Speaker the Premier did not rise to address this question. Here was the language of the question, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Speaker, in the past few years the Tory government has hiked seniors' health care premiums 30 per cent, long-term care fees by [close to] 50 per cent, and eliminated universal eye care and dental benefits, but this is small change compared to what the government has in store for seniors in its still secret health care plan. At the recent Tory Party convention the health minister unveiled a proposal to cap or eliminate provincial drug coverage outside of hospitals, a

change [in policy] that would take more than \$300 million out of the pockets of the province's seniors each year.

That was the preamble, Mr. Chairman.

My question that didn't get answered because of the intervention from the chair was:

Given that the government has already hiked co-payments on the [provincial] seniors' drug plan by 30 per cent, why would the government add to the financial misery of seniors by hatching a secret plan to either cap or even eliminate seniors' prescription drug coverage?

So the Minister of Seniors does have the opportunity to heed the advice of the Speaker to address this question that I raised during question period, Mr. Chairman.

Following up on this question of the potential threat that was implied in the Minister of Health and Wellness's proposal at the time of the Tory convention in Banff, that the coverage may be removed or under consideration to be removed, I want to draw attention to the fact that the 30 per cent copayment that seniors are responsible for for their prescription drugs was increased by 5 per cent. It increased from 25 to 30 per cent some years ago. Although the percentage of 30 per cent has remained stable now for a few years, we do know that the actual drug costs have been rising at a much faster rate than any other item in the health care costs category.

Even though 30 per cent has remained 30 per cent, the cost of drugs has been increasing at a rate of about 17 per cent. So actual costs, even at 30 per cent, to a senior who uses medication on a regular basis have been going up. They have not been stable. They have not been static. There has been an increase in the cost to seniors on an annual basis with respect to the amount of dollars that they have to pay in order to get necessary medication, medications that are prescribed for them to remain reasonably healthy or to recover from illnesses and chronic problems of health that they experience.

I wanted to just draw the attention of the House and of the minister to the various ways which are not really visible and noticeable to us in which seniors get hit by other increasing costs and to dollar amounts that they have to find somewhere to pay for these increasing costs. They have limited incomes and stagnant incomes in many cases, incomes that grow, if they grow at all, at a very, very small, minuscule rate.

Issues have been raised with respect to how various other living costs, you know, resulting from the deregulated electricity plan of this government, the property tax hikes for seniors and others, and many other sources of the costs to seniors are increasing. That point has been made, so I don't want to belabour this. Given that we're hearing from seniors ever more frequently about their sense of economic insecurity, about their fear of not being able to pay their costs, I don't hear from the government benches or from the ministry any serious attempts to address these concerns.

I was looking at a document here where the minister makes an assertion that the low-income seniors are better now than they were five, six years ago. Well, insofar as the minister's statements are correct – and I question this statement in itself – I think the rest of the seniors, those who are not considered by the minister as low income, are the ones who are feeling worse off. So it's they who are being asked by the minister to pay for the marginal improvements that he claims have happened in the plight of the low-income seniors.

It's strange, straight off, if the non low-income seniors have to pay and have to feel impoverished to pay for the improvements that the minister claims are being experienced by low-income seniors. Seniors do pay taxes. Seniors do pay property taxes, income taxes, and many other service taxes which are indirect and invisible, just as anyone else pays, so they're not trying to get a free ride. They're

doing their bit, and they have done so all their lives. They built this province, and to be told what they're told here is, I think, unfair to them.

5:00

On the long-term care issue I have one quick question for the minister. I was looking at Extendicare's business report that I think our staff took off the Internet, in which Extendicare, which is one of the private, for-profit providers—not the major one, perhaps, but one of the for-profit providers of long-term care—claims that its revenues have gone up by 50, 60 per cent. They say that out of this some money will be used for improvement of quality. The rest, they say, will be used of course to help the shareholders of the company. I ask the minister: has the minister got any real performance measures that will hold such companies and such providers to account for their undertaking to improve the quality of care for seniors?

One other matter that I want to raise, Mr. Chairman, very quickly—time is running out—has to do with the management authorities that deal with seniors' housing. I have been receiving complaints from within my own constituency from residents in some of these housing complexes which are managed by these authorities, and the complaints are serious.

When they make these complaints and put them on paper, some of them have been threatened with eviction if they don't stop doing this. I find it a matter of a great deal of concern. I think it's disturbing to see this happen. When seniors living in these places are already vulnerable, they then come under pressure from these management authorities and are threatened with eviction if they open their mouths and complain about the quality of care or don't get explanations for the questions that they have, questions that are quite legitimate.

I have been hearing from my constituents who use these facilities on a regular basis, and in fact I've got a letter on my table which threatens eviction unless these people who complain stop the complaints, and I would like the minister to do something about it.

In that regard, the findings of the Auditor General I think are germane. I was looking at the findings reported in the 2002-2003 Auditor General's report, and they say:

We found that:

- the Ministry did not receive business plans for 4 management organizations, and another 4 of the business plans were not current—out of 11 management organizations we tested.

There are hundreds of those management organizations looking after these facilities, Mr. Chairman, and 4 out of 11 means about 40 per cent of the facilities do not simply have business plans which are clear enough or current enough based on which they can be held to account. That's why, I guess, the problems with seniors arise.

"The management of the operational reviews had the following deficiencies," and there are several of them listed. I'm sure the minister knows about them.

I looked at the department's response to these recommendations and findings of the AG's department. I don't find a very satisfactory response to these very serious concerns that the AG has expressed and which certainly translate into the concerns that my constituents have drawn to my attention with respect to the difficulties that they are faced with when they are dealing with these management authorities.

So these are some of the observations and questions. My time has run out for the moment. I will take another opportunity later. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm very distressed by the extremely misleading comments that were brought forward by the questioner. Very misleading.

Number one, the prescriptions. I don't want these comments to go uncorrected, because I don't want seniors here or perhaps hearing this outside the House to be unduly concerned. The copayment is 30 per cent, but you forget to mention up to a maximum of \$25 even if their prescription is \$500. So if it went up 17 per cent, that money came out of the Health budget, not out of the senior's pocket, so please put all the facts on the table.

I find your comments with respect to long-term care rates very interesting, very exorbitant, extremely exorbitant. Maximum cost in Alberta for a private room, \$48. Maximum cost in British Columbia, \$66.30; Saskatchewan, \$53; Ontario, \$66; Northwest Territories, \$23; Yukon, \$21. Quebec is 2 cents cheaper than us, \$48.28. So we're second lowest. They're the lowest. Nova Scotia, \$208.19, asset tested; New Brunswick, \$134, asset tested; Prince Edward Island, \$117 for the government's and \$150 for the privates, asset tested; Newfoundland, \$92, asset tested.

Now, you're going to sit there and tell me that to have the lowest rates in this country is exorbitant. Where do you get that from? I just find that totally, totally shameful. You talk about advocacy. Under my tutelage of the seniors the thresholds have gone up, the benefits have gone up when we have expanded programs, and we have taken care of the low-income seniors very, very well, thank you very much.

I'm on the public record, as well as some of my colleagues, although it's not government policy and I don't advocate premium supports, but I work within a team system, and as long as I'm the bottom end, I will accept that. But I will continue to advocate for it, and I feel very comfortable advocating in a democratic caucus that respects my views. If I can't convince my colleagues, I guess I'll accept the responsibility for that.

I'd like to know where you get your crazy notions of what happened at our convention in a session that I didn't have the opportunity to attend, but here you are getting information about how the minister of health is going to do these terrible things to people when we haven't even had the meeting. We don't even know what you're talking about, but you've got all the facts.

With respect to management bodies in the Auditor General's report, I've had discussions with the Auditor General off and on and will continue to have them. I find it difficult for us to list assets as a part of government that aren't a part of government, although they manage some of our assets and some of theirs.

If there are any written complaints on any management body in this province that some individual is being unfairly treated, I want those things in my office because they'll go to the department and they will be looked into to see if in fact there's validity to it. [interjection] Well, bring them over. You haven't sent me a single complaint, yet you stand here and say that you've got a desk full. Bring them over. I don't appreciate that kind of nonsense going on in here when you don't have facts. You haven't contacted me, you haven't contacted the staff, and you're making allegations against people who are doing a service not only to seniors but to low-income people, to folks who are in need, and you're sitting there telling me that they are terrible folks. I just don't accept that, thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank the members, especially the Member for Edmonton-Centre, who went through the budget, had legitimate questions. I hope I've been able to answer the majority of those. The ones that we can't answer, we'll forward to you. You had reviewed that, and I appreciate the fact that you took the trouble

to go through it and find questions. I don't hesitate to give credit where credit is due, and you did a good job of that.

5:10

To the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, I appreciated his comments, because one of the things that I'm very proud of is the fact that the people in the Seniors department, when they deal with the public, are very sensitive. They do try to help. They do go the extra mile. No, we can't fix everybody's situation. Certainly, I guess it would be nice if we could. But when they are recognized publicly, I certainly endorse that, and I appreciate that being noticed.

Getting back to the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, I don't know what Extencicare's bottom lines are. I do know this much: they are a cross-Canada operation, and I believe beyond Canada. Where they get their profits from I'm not too terribly sure.

What I do know is that I had a visit with the Caritas group in the Edmonton General hospital at the request of the residents. They were feeling the pinch there also with the lack of funds. So what is going to happen with the extra money that the Caritas group is collecting at the Edmonton General? This was said to all the residents. They had two major concerns. One was the menu; they wanted it enhanced. The commitment was made in front of me that that menu was going to be enhanced. The other thing was that they had a concern with not sufficient staff to meet their needs. I was told that they were going to try to enhance their staff too. So I'm very comfortable that that particular group is sincere, that they've directed their efforts to it, and I'm very pleased that we were somehow able to get some money into the mix for them to in fact do that.

The rates went up effective August 1, I believe it was. There hasn't been the opportunity in three or four or five months to suddenly make all of these hundreds of millions of dollars. It's going to take time for them to accumulate a bit in there. We expect in every single facility in this province appropriate, proper, safe care for every senior, not only seniors but everybody in an extended care facility, because, quite frankly, it's not all seniors. I believe it's 8,800, and a few thousand over that are nonseniors.

We are, I think, looking at situations that arise, whether they be through Health, whether they be through the Seniors end of it, but we make sure that we address the issues and approach them as best we can with appropriate solutions, ones that have meaning and, if it comes to money, ones that have sustainability.

The Chair: I regret that I must interrupt the hon. Minister of Seniors, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5), which provides for the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than 5:15 on a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoon, and this being Thursday afternoon, I must now put the question after consideration

of the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Seniors for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005.

Agreed to:

Operating Expenses and Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$406,422,000
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The Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the Committee of Supply now rise and report the estimates for the Ministry of Seniors.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Klapstein: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Seniors: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases,	\$406,422,000.
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The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? The motion is carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On that note I would move that we now call it 5:30 and get out and enjoy some of that beautiful landscape and spirit which the song so well reflected, the song *Alberta*, a little bit of which was played earlier today.

Let's call it 5:30, Mr. Speaker, and adjourn until Monday, May 10, at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; at 5:16 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]