

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, April 10, 2006**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 06/04/10

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Welcome back.

Let us pray. Grant that we the members of our province's Legislature fulfill our office with honesty and integrity. May our first concern be for the good of all our people. Let us be guided by our deliberations this day. Amen.

Hon. members and individuals in the galleries today, would you now please join in the singing of our national anthem in the language of your choice. We'll be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the privilege to introduce two distinct groups today. The first group is a very special group because they feel like family to me. They are Emilia Karosas, who emigrated from Lithuania, a place where my grandparents on my father's side were born, and her daughter Nejolla Korris, who is very active in the Lithuanian community and who will be visiting Lithuania very soon. Every one of you know at least one member of this family, our wonderful young page Taddes Korris, who is here today and celebrates with me the opportunity to welcome both his mother and grandmother, who are seated in the members' gallery. I would ask them to please rise, and could we give them a wonderful welcome.

The second group today, Mr. Speaker, is 65 students and an additional number of group leaders and parent helpers from Campbelltown elementary school, including a class of French immersion students. They are seated in both galleries. Let me cite the teachers' and parent helpers' names for you. The teachers are Mrs. Roes, M. Levesque, M. Wu, Mrs. Klaassen, Mrs. Nichol, and M. Perrault, also parent helpers Mr. Graham, Mrs. Gelineau, Mr. LeBlanc, Mrs. Tomkins, Mrs. Bambush, Mrs. Girard, and Mrs. Steinke. Would the students with their parent helpers and teachers please rise, and would we all please give them a warm welcome on this occasion.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with great pleasure that I rise today and introduce 28 visitors from the St. Joseph Catholic school in Whitecourt. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Associate Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 25 special guests from my old community school. They're in the public gallery. They've come an awful long distance on a bus today. I'd like to introduce their teacher, Mrs. Booth, and parent helpers Mrs. Lahd, Mr. Deitz, Mrs. Prentice, Mrs. McKay, Mrs. Fetkenher, Mr. Henry, and Mrs. Heather. This is one of the first schools I'm aware of that went to the four-day school week. Milo is a small village at the north end of Lake McGregor, a really nice middle-of-the-prairie vacation spot, where there is lots of sailboating and lots of fishing. I'd like all our guests to rise and receive a special warm applause.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment.

Mr. Boutillier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and good afternoon to all on this beautiful Alberta day. It's my pleasure to introduce two constituents from the oil sands capital of the world, Fort McMurray. With me today are Iris Pasareno, the program director of the Salvation Army START program, and Niki-Lou Mackin, who is the co-chair of Family Voices in the northeastern region. They are truly two champions, capturing the spirit of having energy in Fort McMurray, caring for those in need. I'd ask them both to rise and receive the warm welcome of the members of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and to the members assembled Ryan Schubert, a resident of Fort Saskatchewan, a first-year political science student at the U of A, and a worker in several successful campaigns. Also accompanying him up in the gallery is Theresa Lightfoot, who serves the constituents of Strathcona from the office here in the Legislature. I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Battle River-Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great honour for me today to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly two incredibly important people in my life. The first is my strength, my confidence, my rock: my wife, Sue. The second, I'm proud to say, is my future and the future of this province, my son, Austin, who's three months old. I'd ask them to rise in the gallery and receive the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a young lady that I have known for many years. As a matter of fact, this gal and I graduated from Blackie high school together. Her name is Sheila Macklin. After high school she received her postsecondary teaching degree and taught in the Willow Creek school division for many years. Always an avid reader, she was appointed to the board of the Marigold library system in 1998 and for the last number of years has served as chairman of the board. We are all aware of the tremendous success of the Marigold system. No doubt, Sheila is here today to check out our new Minister of Community Development,

responsible for the libraries. I would ask Sheila to please rise and receive the usual warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

1:40 Tuition Fees for Postsecondary Education

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the new Minister of Advanced Education noted over the weekend, this government's approach to their alleged top priority, advanced education, has been, quote, willy-nilly and no plan, unquote. News flash: there's no plan in any other ministry either. My first question is to the new minister. When can we expect to see the long-awaited draft tuition affordability policy?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Herard: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I guess that it's kind of a unique opportunity to say that for a maiden question, being presented by my critic, who's also my constituent, I want to make sure he understands that my door is always open for all of my constituents. I don't ask them how they voted.

On the question, this was with Don Braid in Calgary, and I must say that he as well as his wife, Sydney Sharpe, who's also a journalist in Calgary, have always treated me fairly. We were talking about what happens when there's a perception that if you build something in Edmonton, you have to build one in Calgary too. What I want to do is essentially have an 80,000-foot view of Alberta, look at where all our facilities are, look at where all our students are, look at where the bottlenecks are, and make decisions that Albertans will understand.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That was in answer to my second question, so I'll reask my first. When are we going to see the tuition policy?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Herard: Thank you very much. I heard you this time. I had an opportunity to meet last Friday with my executive committee and this morning with 150 of my staff. I can tell you that we've got a great team. I'm being assured that over the next few weeks the reports on both A Learning Alberta and tuition are going to come my way. I will take them through the process that we have with respect to standing policy, cabinet, and caucus. So stay tuned.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Watching that channel for a long time.

Given that today, April 10, is the second anniversary of Mount Royal College's written proposal to become an undergraduate university, can the minister confirm that MRU will be a priority if and when he comes up with a plan?

Mr. Herard: Thank you very much for that question, hon. member. Mount Royal College is doing all the right things. You know, they've applied for applied degrees. There is a whole list of them: bachelor of nursing, bachelor of business administration, bachelor of

arts, bachelor of arts in justice studies, bachelor of science, bachelor of communication. Those particular applications are currently being reviewed, and as soon as that is done, we will proceed further.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Rod Love Consulting Inc.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Official Opposition revealed that the Finance ministry paid the Premier's former chief of staff, Rod Love, \$46,000 in 2004. When asked why the consulting contracts did not provide adequate documentation for the services received, the minister stated, "A significant amount of advice . . . was provided verbally, some probably in written form." This government appears to have learned nothing from the Kelley Charlebois scandal. My questions are for the Minister of Finance. Given that the minister stated that some of the services were probably in written form, why did they not show up in the access to information that came back to us?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, you may recall that when the question came from across the way last week, I said that I would review that and see if there were any written reports, which there aren't. It was strategic advice. It was given in verbal form. I indicated as well that Alberta Finance had reviewed its contracting mechanisms, which I think is a good thing and a positive thing. We should all do that on a very regular basis and have some very stringent terms of reference and expectations that will be in any contracts that we write with anyone for consulting or any other endeavour. They will lay out very clearly what the expectations are and whether it will be written reports, advice strategy that may be verbal. It will be very clear in all contracts as to what the expectations are of the person that we contract with.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: can the minister tell us if Mr. Love won the \$46,000 contracts through a proper competitive tendering process?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I cannot say that with any certainty. I was not the person who entered into the contract. Again, I will review that and get the hon. member an answer.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: will the minister assure this Assembly that contract completion evaluation forms were signed and dated for the \$46,000 as per the Auditor General's recommendations following the Charlebois scandal?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, I can review that for the hon. member and get back to him.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Private Health Insurance

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our publicly funded health care system offers Albertans a competitive advantage that will be lost under the third way. Increasing the role for private insurance shifts costs to individuals and will increase the financial burden for

businesses that are forced to spend more on employee benefits. For private-sector employers it will mean reduced profits, and for the public sector it will mean reduced services. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Given that the larger employers are in a better position to afford extended health benefits, what is the minister doing to prevent smaller employers from being placed at a disadvantage when it comes to attracting and retaining workers?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, the health policy framework did not contemplate that we would introduce private insurance in either a mandatory or voluntary way. Our whole discussion surrounding this has been relative to the removal of the prohibition for people in Alberta to purchase private insurance. Simply that: removal of the prohibition. There's no barrier in Saskatchewan, no barrier in Manitoba. In fact, there are no barriers in five provinces and territories. The only barriers that exist in terms of purchasing private insurance are in Quebec, B.C., Alberta, P.E.I., and Ontario.

Mr. Speaker, since the Chaoulli decision by the Supreme Court, which identified that it was mitigated against the Charter rights of the people in Quebec to have a prohibition on private insurance, and since many constitutional lawyers believe that this is transposable – in other words, section 1 of the Canadian Charter is like section 7 of the Quebec Charter – we have been looking at removing the barrier to providing private insurance opportunities for those who wish to avail themselves of them. That has no suggestion whatsoever of the government either selling insurance or forcing that on anybody.

Ms Blakeman: It has everything to do with it.

To the same minister: given that auto manufacturers like Toyota and GM have chosen to operate in Canada rather than in the United States because medicare saves money, why would the minister proceed with third-way private insurance initiatives, removing barriers, or however she wishes to frame it, that will increase costs and make Alberta less competitive? Why would you do that to us?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I think that my first answer was particularly clear, that we were not trying to do anything that would in any way affect the stability of the health insurance program here under the Alberta health insurance plan, the medicare plan. But I will take the opportunity to remind Albertans that almost a third of the services that we pay for here from our general revenue fund are things that the Canada Health Act does not mandate us to pay for. We do so under our health insurance plan, the medicare plan. They can call it what they will. The Alberta health insurance plan that we currently have covers Albertans for chiropractic services in co-payment, responsibilities for much of podiatry services, for much of psychiatric services, and for many other services that are not mandated under the Canada Health Act.

Mr. Speaker, I would just take exception to the fact that there is some belief being perpetrated by the opposition that we are going to foist private insurance on Albertans or corporations. We have absolutely no intent of doing that.

1:50

Ms Blakeman: It's called delisting.

To the same minister: how does the minister intend to deal with increasing costs in the public sector given that organized labour is now encouraging groups to include a clause in contracts so that extra costs generated by the third-way reforms will be covered by the employer?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I've had the distinct pleasure of meeting with some of the organized labour groups either because they came in for consultation or in one instance because I went out to visit them

at the offices of the AUPE, the public employees, over on 170th Street. They never ever once suggested to me that they were introducing extra clauses in bargaining. They did identify that if there were extra costs as a result of any moves that we made, they would be looking for those from employers, but I assured them on that occasion that that wasn't the case.

Mr. Speaker, we know today that we get less than a billion dollars from our health care premiums, and there's less than \$2 billion that comes from the federal government. So in terms of a budget that's over \$10 billion, there's a considerable amount that comes from the general revenue fund. Whether it's under this government or any other government, there's a considerable gap in what we're receiving for revenues and what we're actually expending.

Mr. Speaker, none of the labour groups have made contact with me to formally indicate that they are writing those clauses for collective agreements.

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

Health Care Reform

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Opposition to the government's two-tier, private health care scheme is not limited to New Democrats, the Friends of Medicare, or even Martha and Henry. It's not limited just to the Tory leadership contenders either. No less a person than the Prime Minister of Canada himself, a Tory, has fired a warning shot across the bow of the Minister of Health and Wellness on her third-way proposals. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Is the Prime Minister of Canada wrong when he expresses concern about dual practice creating conflicts of interest for physicians as there would be a financial incentive for them to stream patients into the private portion of their practice?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister's letter has some wonderful news in it in that for the first time a Prime Minister of Canada has written a letter to this government suggesting to our Premier that much of what we have done is laudable but also that, in fact, the provinces themselves have the responsibility for the delivery of health care. We have never had that acknowledgement before. The Prime Minister opened the door for the health minister, myself, to have discussions with his Health minister surrounding some of those proposals. He's identified a concern; he's expressed it relative to doctors working in both systems.

Mr. Speaker, I'm going to use the opportunity to speak to the Health minister about why we would engage in that kind of opportunity. We are in fact trying to make sure that we protect great doctors from leaving and moving over to the private system, where, for example, in Quebec there's absolutely no control, nothing that implies that those doctors make a contribution to the public health care system. They move to the private system without any engagement whatsoever in on-call or any other capacity.

So I have received that concern. I acknowledge that concern expressed by the Prime Minister, and I hope to persuade them to look at some of the other options or at least why we are providing the options that we have in the health policy framework.

Mr. Mason: The minister should have kept reading after the first paragraph. The Prime Minister goes on to say that allowing double-dipping doctors "legitimizes queue-jumping as it provides an approved mechanism for patients to pay to seek treatment at the front of the line." Given that, is the Prime Minister wrong? Will the minister come out of her message box and answer the Prime Minister's question?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, I will be pleased to answer the Prime Minister's question and the Minister of Health's question. In the manner in which this is posed, it would sound like there hasn't also been a kindly gesture made by the Prime Minister for us to engage in further dialogue. I think he made some pointed references to things that he would like us to review. He also identified care guarantees for us to review and indicated that there were discussion points that he encouraged us to be a part of. I am confident that we can engage in that kind of discussion.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, given that the Prime Minister has expressed concern about the dual practices proposed by this minister being a magnet for rural physicians to migrate to urban centres, what guarantee can the minister give – guarantee – that rural doctors will not leave rural areas and small towns and move to the big cities where they can make more money? Is the Prime Minister wrong?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would agree with the hon. member on this point, and I think his underlying message is: what are we going to do to make sure that there's an adequate workforce in rural Alberta if in any capacity of the system we introduce private care? I think that's a very legitimate concern. It's one that many of the rural MLAs here in government have expressed to me. We have a workforce plan that is being developed in more detail to try and make sure that we're attacking the workforce from a number of areas. I think that what we have to do in detailing the type of supports that could be provided or the framework for private delivery is make sure that whatever type of private delivery is done would not negatively impact the public system. I use my favourite example of the ophthalmologist in Calgary that spends two weeks of every month going to California to lecture at university because he is not able to do a full four weeks here because he's paid only for the amount that he can afford to do within a two-week period. In fact, if he were to practise here in private care, it would not negatively impact rural Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Calgary Ring Road

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Due to tremendous growth in Calgary and area, including of course Calgary-Lougheed, over the past decade, many of my constituents have expressed rather extreme concern about traffic congestion. My questions are for the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation. Could the minister please update us on the status of this important project?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, this is a very important road, of course, not only just for the city of Calgary but as we look at the Canamex highway and how this all ties in together. The road, of course, goes through some of the Tsuu T'ina First Nation, so there has to be negotiations with the First Nation, and those negotiations seem to be progressing quite well. There's real motivation on both sides to complete them. However, there's some discussion about the appraised value of the property, and of course that is very important because that relates to what the First Nation is to be paid.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is for the same minister unless he would like his associate minister to be part of the answer. The question is: when will the negotiations

conclude – not begin but conclude – with the Tsuu T'ina Nation so that the project can be undergone with construction?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated earlier, the negotiations are moving along quite well. However, I can't give a definite answer on how soon they'll be completed. I can tell the hon. member that a lot of preparatory work is being done, like some of the engineering, some of the public consultation, and some of the functional planning. Of course, the environmental issues are being looked at as we speak. So we're getting in the position where once it's ratified, we'll be able to move forward quite rapidly.

Mr. Rodney: My final question, then, to the same minister: once an agreement is reached with the Tsuu T'ina Nation, can you tell us how long it will be before construction begins and people are actually driving on a ring road in the southwest part of Calgary?

Mr. Lund: Well, as I indicated, a lot of that preparatory work is being done. The actual engineering, of course, the detailed engineering, would take probably six months, maybe a little longer. Then, of course, the contract would have to be tendered. So I would imagine that it would probably be at least a year after the negotiations are completed.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

2:00 Applewood Park Community Association

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Auditor General found that the Applewood Park Community Association could not show how it spent its third grant of \$20,000. In fact, nearly \$6,000 is missing; no receipts, nothing. The 2006 fiscal plan states very clearly that the Wild Rose Foundation board is seeking recovery of the third grant of \$20,000. To the Minister of Community Development: has the department collected the money back, yes or no?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the hon. member for the question. As he indicated, the Auditor General came up with some recommendations, so an entirely new set of guidelines and accountability requirements has been developed for the program. The new guidelines and the accountability requirements were developed by the department's staff, and they were reviewed by an independent agency. The program has recently been reinstated, and in regard to the Applewood grant I can inform the member that the file has been forwarded to the Crown debt collections to recover the funds. The process is now under way.

Mr. Agnihotri: To the same minister: does the minister know what happened to the \$6,000 missing in the third grant?

Mr. Ducharme: I'm not aware of that, but as I indicated, we are going to recover the monies.

Mr. Agnihotri: Well, you should know that.

Anyway, to the same minister: given that the auditor for Applewood and the chief financial officer for the Calgary-Montrose constituency association are the same person, can the minister offer any explanation or assurance to this House that funds were not used in support of constituency association business?

Mr. Ducharme: I can't speculate on that, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Bowness High School

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bowness high school is a vibrant school with academic, drama, dance, mechanics, construction, computers, and multimedia education. Unfortunately, for years health concerns have also been attributed to the old math wing of the Calgary Bowness high school. My question today is for the Minister of Education. What steps will the government take to address health issues in this facility?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, the government of Alberta provides money to locally elected school boards, who in turn prioritize the expenditure of those dollars. In fact, we provide hundreds of millions of dollars to accomplish these purposes. Let us say that locally elected school boards are the government's trustee, and in this particular case they have taken some very positive steps. They have done some extensive air quality testing. They have found no health-related concerns. As a precautionary measure they did remove the carpet in that math wing, and they'll do whatever else is required to try and eradicate the problem. But at the moment there is nothing that can be tracked to that specific problem.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In addition to health concerns Bowness high school is in need of modernization. Does the modernization have to be designed to strictly follow our old school utilization formula, which includes things like narrow hallways, smaller classrooms, generally trying to get the square footage of the building down, or does the board just have to design the school to be cost-effective to maintain?

Mr. Zwozdesky: That's a complicated question, Mr. Speaker. Let me say that school boards develop their capital plans, and this particular renovation request for Bowness high was, as I recall, in the 11th ranked spot for priorities from what I remember the board having turned in relevant to its '05-06 needs. I don't know if that will move up the ranking schedule or not when the June requests come in from that particular board. However, I am satisfied, at least for the time being, that the formula that has been used has had some merit, and if necessary we will be addressing that and perhaps changing some of it now that we have the responsibility in Education to do that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much. My final question regarding Bowness high is very direct. Is money forthcoming from Alberta Education to address the needs of this high school and other school facilities?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, it depends on what the specific needs might turn out to be, and that has yet to be determined. If it's determined that monies are needed for some new construction, it could come out of one envelope. If it's a different type of upgrading or modernization or more of an infrastructure and maintenance renewal type of project, then that money would come out of a different envelope. But it's always up to the priority of the local school board and how they feel about it.

The second part of the answer is this: I have been asked to develop a school infrastructure plan that will deal with new construction needs, new school replacement needs, modernizations, upgrades, rightsizings, and so on. That includes modulars and portables as well as the second envelope, which is infrastructure and maintenance renewal. I hope to have that plan ready sometime in June, and I'm then going to be sharing it with the school boards; in fact, they'll be helping develop it.

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

Sale of Edmonton Ring Road Land

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Thursday the minister of infrastructure stated in regard to the sale of Edmonton ring road lands: "If we were to go and purchase those properties today, we'd be paying several times what was paid back then." Yet records show that this government purchased ring road land in 1981 for \$42,000 per acre, and then sold most of it in 1999 for only \$7,500 per acre. It appears that while ordinary Albertans are charged premium rates for property in Edmonton, some companies which donate to the Progressive Conservative Party acquire land at fire-sale prices. My questions are to the minister of infrastructure. Why did this government sell the ring road land to Lehigh Portland Cement Limited for only \$7,500 per acre when taxpayers forked out \$42,000 per acre 18 years earlier?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I must say that it seems to be getting better. At least they gave me five minutes' notice today of this very complex deal, and I'm now requested to answer questions relative to it. Once again, we'll have to investigate. We don't know the details of this. Actually, some of this dates back to '92, so it's getting to be quite old. But we will investigate it and see what we can find.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what is the process in his department for appraising such lands given the huge discrepancy between the purchase price and the recent sale price?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, once again, I've got to investigate what this deal was all about. As you remember, last week we had about six questions relative to some land that was purchased, and in part of the agreement there was excess land to be returned to the person that sold us the land in the first place. I don't know, from the quick perusal that I've had of this particular deal, which amounts to several pages, just what all of the answers are.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That was a process question.

However, will the minister ask the office of the chief internal auditor to investigate the liquidation of this land and others like it?

Mr. Lund: Once again, we'll look into the whole situation, Mr. Speaker.

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

2:10 Calgary Registry Services

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It has recently come to my attention that the Department of Government Services forced a registry agent to sell their registry, which was located in downtown Calgary. My question is to the Minister of Government Services. Why did your department take this action against the owner of this business?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Member for Calgary-Shaw is correct. Government Services did uncover a long history of unprofessional practices, and there were some contract breaches, so I have to say that as a result of the investigation that was conducted by the department staff, the owner was notified to sell the business; otherwise, his agreement would be cancelled.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you. I just have one supplemental. As a result of your ministry's actions, will Calgarians now be forced to travel to other locations in the city to be served?

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, Mr. Speaker, Calgarians will not have to travel to another location. This agency has been sold. Government Services will work with the new owners and operators to ensure that there's a smooth transition, and Calgarians will be served properly and correctly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Sale of Edmonton Ring Road Land (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Serviced industrial land around the Yellowhead Trail and 178th Street is now listed for sale at at least \$55,000 per acre. Members of the inner circle of the PC Party, including Jack Agrios, Robert Lloyd, and Gary G. Campbell, sold land to the province in 1981 for \$42,000 per acre, a deal worth \$6.2 million for themselves, but now we find out that it's a bad deal for the taxpayers because the government turned around and sold this land in 1999 for \$7,500 per acre. My first question is to the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation. Is Gary G. Campbell, the gentleman who was one of the sellers of that land in 1981, the same person who now sits on this government's Internal Audit Committee as a public member? Also, is this the same person who is a fundraiser for the PC Party in Alberta?

An Hon. Member: Is it the same guy?

Mr. MacDonald: Same guy.

The Speaker: The latter part of the question, dealing with political party matters, is really not relevant in here. The first part is, though.

Mr. Lund: As I indicated earlier, this is the same parcel of land that the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung asked about. We will be looking into the whole situation.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that Lehigh Portland Cement sold the land to CN immediately after they purchased it from the government, was there a public tender on the sale of this land?

Mr. Lund: Same answer as last: we'll have to look into how it was handled. It was a number of years ago.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: why is this government selling public land now for so little when last week the hon. minister stated in this House that we're selling land now for the taxpayers and indicating that we are getting more money for it than when we purchased it when we were accumulating this for the ring roads? Why is there this liquidation price for this specific parcel of land?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, in the process that we use today – and this is what I will refer to – we get the land appraised. We will then put it on the market through real estate companies. They attempt to sell it. In some cases, in fact, it's sold for even more than the appraised value. If there's something different with these lands, we'll try to find out what exactly it is. But at this point that's the process that we use to make sure that we're getting top value for the land for the taxpayers.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Security of Children's Services Offices

Dr. Pannu: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, the NDP opposition has learned that on the weekend of April 1 and 2 a number of computers were stolen from the Children's Services ministry offices located on the 11th floor of Sterling Place. The 11th floor houses a number of very important children's services, including resources for children with disabilities and adoption services among others. My question is to the Minister of Children's Services. Why did the minister fail to publicly disclose the thefts of laptop computers from its offices if for no other reason than to at least reassure the families of the Children's Services' clients and the general public that confidential information has not been compromised?

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, I have to say in all honesty that I'm not aware of this situation, but I certainly will check into it immediately after question period and get back to the hon. member.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that these computers were stolen over a week ago, why have none of the officials briefed the minister about this, particularly in light of possible breaches of client confidentiality?

Mrs. Forsyth: Again, Mr. Speaker, I'm not aware of that, but as I said to the member, immediately after question period I will be going to my office and I will be finding out why that has happened, and I will get back to him.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, it's really surprising that the minister hasn't learned about this very serious breach of security.

Given that we have been told that the stolen computers were laptops, making it more likely that sensitive data is stored on the computer's local drive than on a server, how can the minister be so lackadaisical about the whole matter rather taking responsibility for her own failure to do anything about it?

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, the one thing that I'm not is lackadaisical. I can tell you that the minister is sitting here quite taken aback by his question. I was not aware of it. I think that probably being honest about the situation is the best policy. I have indicated to him that I will immediately after question period go up to my office and get to the bottom of this and get the answer.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Traffic Safety

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In September 2004 the government accepted all the recommendations of the McDermid report *Saving Lives on Alberta's Roads*. It has been more than a year and a half since, and while we continue to hear about the fatalities on our roads, we have heard little about the government's plan to implement these important recommendations. My question is to the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation. When will the government take action and finally implement the recommendations of the McDermid report?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, the fact is that immediately when that report was given to the former minister, he got together some 12 government departments and some 35 groups of stakeholders, and they went through the report and came up with a traffic plan. Now, some of the plan has been implemented, things like passing an emergency vehicle and that you have to reduce your speed if you're in a lane next to it down to 60 kilometres or whatever the posted speed limit if it's below that, but there are a number of things that are in that plan that require a lot of work, changes of legislation. Some of it is to do with engineering of the roads, some that are controversial and will be going out for further consultation. So it's not as though there's been nothing done. We will be implementing even some more of it fairly shortly, but there has been progress made.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplementary question is to the same minister. How much longer do we have to wait before all this traffic safety plan is finally implemented?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, there's a lot to be done here with things like engineering, legislation, but there are some controversial parts to the proposal as well, things like the speed on green photo radar, the fact that people over 75 would have to have medical assessments done annually. Those are very controversial things, so we will be putting that out for public consultation. They're just proposals coming out of the committee, but we want to consult with Albertans and find out whether, in fact, those are the kinds of things they want to see happen.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary question is to the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security.

How is the minister going to make sure that we have enough police officers, special constables for enforcement since one of the main recommendations of the McDermid report was enforcement?

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. minister

Mr. Cenaiko: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That's a very good question. In fact, the hon. Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation and myself and the Minister of Justice are meeting tonight at 5:30 to discuss the traffic safety plan.

As well, though, in response to the hon. Member for West Yellowhead's question there are a number of issues that we want to look at, obviously education and enforcement. Interdiction teams are very critical as we move forward regarding traffic enforcement education for all of our highways. But the real issues that we want to look at are the 400 fatalities and the, I think, 18,000 or 13,000 serious collisions on our highways in Alberta, which, obviously, have a huge impact on the lives of those individuals that have been injured but as well on our whole health care system. We want to be able to look at the strategies in place throughout Alberta so that we can work with our officers, whether it's police officers, whether it's sheriffs, whether it's peace officers that are hired by municipalities, that are in place right now. It's a strategy to build on how we can educate the community, educate young drivers, educate old drivers but, as well, ensure that the enforcement initiative is there to provide again that understanding by drivers that have the privilege of driving in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Stony Plain.

Coal-bed Methane Drilling in Horseshoe Canyon

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Minister of Environment announced much-needed baseline testing of water wells as now a mandatory requirement prior to coal-bed methane drilling only after public pressure from the opposition along with rural Albertans. This is progress, but many landowners have serious questions about the contamination of groundwater and drinking water over the past five years. What can Albertans count on in terms of lost confidence in the investigation of this department in holding responsible parties accountable? To the environment minister: will the minister appoint an independent, scientific panel to investigate the impacts of five years without baseline testing?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, first, I want to thank the hon. member for recognizing the very positive and proactive action that the Ministry of Environment has taken pertaining to the issue of water. I also want to say that the protection of our air, our land, and our water is a top priority for me as the Minister of Environment, and I am the Minister of Environment. With every fibre of energy that I have, we are testing – not only that, but we have an independent panel that is reviewing the results of the baseline testing that we are developing. Even more importantly, we're going to be comparing apples and oranges and turnips, not, shall I say, the examples of where we are doing some testing that ultimately were comparing apples, oranges, and turnips as opposed to in fact comparing apples and apples. It's a very proactive approach that I think the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View would agree is very positive in securing our water supply well into the future.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Could we try again? To the Environment minister: what is your department doing to establish an independent, scientific panel to investigate five years without baseline testing of the Horseshoe Canyon?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, for any member of the public or landowners located in the Horseshoe Canyon area or anywhere else in this province, they can, number one, call our hotline, which is a 24-hour environmental protection hotline, relative to concerns raised. It's 1-800-222-6514.

Also, pertaining to independent reviewing, test results will be shared directly with the landowners as well as with Alberta Environment. We will then review the results of the database of information from this very proactive testing that we're doing, and we will report it in a very transparent way to all Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Energy: why does the Energy and Utilities Board refer water contamination complaints from a landowner to the company drilling the coal-bed methane well rather than investigating the complaint?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, the first responsibility of any company that's applied for an application to drill is to follow all of the standards that are there. Therefore, if there are problems and concerns, it is their requirement, first and foremost, to be proactive in dealing with the landowners on these issues. That's how it is, and we would continue to encourage that.

The industry has been very proactive even on the water issues that you'd mentioned. It's the industry working with stakeholders that has brought forth these recommendations that there be baseline testing. This has been very much supported. These are the kinds of initiatives that industry continues to work with. There are challenges from time to time given the quantity of the activity, but they take a very proactive establishment to ensure that those water, environmental, and landowner issues are dealt with. It's in their interest, and it's in all Albertans' interest.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Stony Plain, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Water Quality in Wabamun Lake Area

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On August 3, 2005, a train derailment at Lake Wabamun caused over 700,000 litres of bunker C crude to spill into the lake. Since that date, the village of Wabamun has had to truck in water for its potable water use. My question is to the Minister of Environment. What is his ministry doing to resolve this ongoing concern?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, first and foremost, I want to say how proud I was of Alberta Environment when we issued enforcement orders to Canadian National within the first 48 hours of the incident. I also want to say that our Water for Life strategy, which commits to safe, secure drinking water for all Albertans, is something we take very seriously. We're working closely with the municipality. As well, we're working with Capital health. I want to reassure all members of this Assembly but also all Albertans and especially those in the Wabamun area that they presently have access to a supply of water which is safe and clean. They will continue to have that safe, clean drinking water. As we go forward in our Water for Life strategy of our regional system, we're working very closely with the affected municipality involved.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. There are a number of other municipalities in the area who have water concerns not directly related to the CN spill; however, they do have issues regarding potable water. So I'd like to know what his ministry is specifically doing to address these regional water supply issues.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Yes, Mr. Speaker. It's a very good question because of the importance of groundwater wells. In fact, you may not be aware, but there are three new groundwater wells that have already been drilled for one of the municipality's villages. These are being connected in a regional way to the existing treatment facility, which again, I think, is taking energy and resources, pulling them together to ensure that safe and secure drinking water. These wells will supply water for the village in the region for many years to come. So I want to personally assure everyone in this House, all Albertans, and the members of Wabamun that we will continue to do everything possible in securing safe drinking water for the members in the Wabamun area based on this terrible, what I call, ecological disaster that took place last summer.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental is to the same minister. He's responded in regard to the village of Wabamun's concerns directly, but I wonder if he could tell me what the long-term commitments for other communities in the Wabamun region are regarding their water concerns as well.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, as you know, we have a new policy committee chair of Energy and Sustainable Development, which is so keen on our Water for Life strategy. He's from Battle River-Wainwright, and he often pontificates about the importance of water.

I want to say to you, Mr. Speaker, that as we go forward, the \$174 million in the Minister of Finance's estimates, of course, as part of our budget this year will be a welcome addition of money that, in fact, will help supply some of those regional water treatment facilities that we are endeavouring to prioritize in terms of that secure, safe drinking water that I've spoken about earlier.

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

Parks and Protected Areas

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Caribou Mountains wildland provincial park was designated as home for one of Alberta's threatened caribou herds. On Friday we discovered that the advisory committee struck to develop a plan to steward this precious ecosystem has gone off the rails and recommended revoking the wildland park status. My questions are to the Minister of Community Development. Will the minister assure this House today that he will not allow the Caribou Mountains provincial park to lose its protected status as a wildland provincial park?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

2:30

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government of Alberta considers all suggestions that Albertans bring forward. The

local community nominated the Caribou Mountains wildland area for protection through the special places program. As the questioner has identified, a local advisory committee is working with parks staff on the management plan for the Caribou Mountains wildland area. Input from the public and stakeholders regarding the management plan will also be considered. There is presently no industrial activity occurring in the Caribou Mountains wildland. Hunting and off-highway vehicle use are allowed. As has been identified by the member, the issue is off-highway use off designated trails. I basically just was briefed on it briefly today. I cannot provide you with an answer today, but I'll certainly be looking into the matter.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister commit today to table all recommendations made by all parks advisory and planning committees in this House?

Mr. Ducharme: My understanding is that it is a public, local committee. I will be looking over the recommendations that come forward and will do the right thing at the appropriate time.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. It's not just this park. It's all parks advisory plans, please.

Given the lack of legislated protection from industrial development such as drilling in the Rumsey natural area will this minister commit to actually protecting Alberta's protected areas?

Mr. Ducharme: Mr. Speaker, the government does try to provide a good balance in regard to the benefits of the natural resources that we have along with the protection of our environmental areas. I'm sure that all considerations will be put on the table at that time, before a decision is made.

Vignettes from the Assembly's History

The Speaker: Hon. members, in a few seconds from now I'll call upon the first of a number of members to participate in Members' Statements, but first of all I want to start off today with a quotation.

There have been significant extensions in the amount of time and effort required by an M.L.A. The very nature of the expansion and growth of Alberta has expanded those duties. The nature of modern government has expanded those duties. The modern communications age has expanded those duties. I think that has been a very useful expansion, and I think a very good thing for democracy that we in fact do have a much closer contact with our constituents because of modern communications.

That quotation is found in *Alberta Hansard*, November 2, 1972, and those are the words of Dr. Hugh M. Horner, who was the federal Member of Parliament for Jasper-Edson from 1958 to 1967. In 1967 he was elected as the MLA for Lac Ste. Anne as a member of the Official Opposition and served as the Opposition House Leader from 1967 through to 1971. He was re-elected in 1971, 1975, and 1979 in the constituency of Barrhead. He resigned in September 1979. Among the portfolios held by Dr. Horner in addition to being Deputy Premier was that of minister of agriculture, the portfolio currently served by his son the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert. Dr. Horner passed away on March 25, 1997.

The Speaker: Hon. members, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

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

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

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my great pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House several guests here who come in support of Bill 206. Some of them are from ECMAS. I'm not sure whether I have all the names up there, but let me just say a few names: Gary Devries, Verena Primeau and her wonderful little son Brayden, Kay McCaig, Elsie Cable, and Abdulahi Mahamad. Could you please stand?

Thank you.

Mr. VanderBurg: I'd like to introduce a good friend of mine and a good friend of many MLAs. He's off abroad right now studying, but he took the time to come and visit us today while he was touring this part of Canada. I'd ask Bart West to stand and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Members' Statements**

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

Child Access Exchange Centres

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The initial period following a divorce or separation is often a stressful and confusing time for a child. This stress is further compounded by the sudden absence of one parent from the home. Study after study has shown that children are much happier and healthier when they have access to both their parents.

Reducing the obstacles to child access and visitation is an important way to ensure that children have the opportunity to spend quality time with both their parents and realize their full potential. One method of addressing child access concerns would be to establish provincially designated child access exchange centres for individuals to use both voluntarily and on court order. These would be childcentric facilities where one parent could drop off the child to be picked up by the other parent in a neutral, confrontation-free environment.

The standardization of such facilities would ensure that drop-off and pickup services were delivered in a uniform and non-confrontational manner by trained personnel and staff province-wide. In addition, the staff at these centres could help foster understanding between parents and guardians and help them better resolve disagreements pertaining to access and exchange of children.

I have received correspondence on this matter from community organizations such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of Calgary and the Southside Christian daycare in Edmonton, who have expressed their support for designated child access exchange centres. Moreover, these groups have indicated that they would be willing to offer their sites for use as designated access exchange facilities.

Mr. Speaker, I strongly feel that the provincial designation of child access exchange facilities would be a valuable step in reducing the stress associated with child visitation and access.

Thank you.

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

Una Maclean Evans

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to take note of one of my constituents. On March 11 last Mrs. Una Maclean Evans celebrated her 80th birthday. This recognition was researched and written by our mutual friend, John Patrick Day.

Mrs. Evans has been active at all levels of public life in our province and country for 60 years, ranging from her service in World War II to her ongoing interest and advocacy at all levels of government.

Hon. members will possibly first think of Mrs. Evans for her service on Edmonton's city council. During that time she was instrumental in changing the entire direction of Edmonton's transportation policy and in planning the direction of new subdivisions, most memorably that small city now represented by our colleagues for Edmonton-Mill Creek, Edmonton-Ellerslie, and Edmonton-Mill Woods. Anyone who served with her will recall the great intelligence and integrity she brought to city council. She remains quite active in advising and assisting civic organizations and in keeping policy matters before the public.

For several years she served honourably and well as a citizenship court judge. In this capacity she welcomed several tens of thousands of new Canadians to this country as citizens. It is perhaps possible that some hon. members here are among their number.

Mrs. Evans, of course, was married to the well-known and well-loved journalist, Art Evans. This in itself would have made her a public figure. As she often remarks, she was never quite sure how much of her home life would appear on the front page of the *Edmonton Journal* the following morning. I think, though, in this regard, accompanying her husband, Art, on his round of community places, coffee shops, hotel lounges, and other such places kept Una close to the ground, hearing what the people of Edmonton and Alberta were really saying. She remains a good listener today.

More significant – this is what she thinks is her own greatest contribution – is her historical work on the UFA government and its leading members. As a researcher for the Glenbow-Alberta Institute she conducted long and detailed interviews with former Premiers Brownlee and Reid, not to mention many others. Most of the historical record we have of those governments is her work. I would also add, Mr. Speaker, that there is hardly a part of Alberta's history that does not have some contribution by her to our knowledge of it.

Thank you.

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

2:40 Longest Indoor Soccer Game

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Here in Alberta we have a long-standing tradition of athletic excellence, from our professional teams to the excellent showing of our provincial athletes at the recent Olympic Games.

Today I bring forward another example of this excellence. Yesterday morning dozens of athletes wrapped up their participation in the world's longest indoor soccer game. One hundred and sixty people spent 36 hours playing soccer in an attempt to break the world record. I'm sure that once their sore muscles subside, they will realize that their endurance has led them to a great accomplishment. I understand that their attempt will be submitted to the *Guinness World Records* book.

Setting a world record demands the most from a person's physical abilities and concentration and determination. Considering the popularity of this sport across the world, it would be exciting if a

group from Alberta is able to carve out a special place in history. Events like these also raise the many benefits of sports: they keep us active, Mr. Speaker, healthy, and on the right track to success.

The legacy of this weekend will go beyond setting the record. The world's longest indoor soccer game was also a fundraiser for the Mill Woods youth centre. Thanks to their efforts \$65,000 was raised. These funds will benefit Mill Woods' youth through the support of a drop-in centre.

I'd like to ask all members of this House to join me in congratulating these young people on raising the money and doing this.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Before and After School Care for Children

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta has a booming economy, and with a booming economy comes booming economy problems. One major concern that we are facing everywhere in Alberta is the great demand for employees in every area of industry, small business, retail, health care, home care, and school-age care.

Red Deer Child Care has been forced to close two of their before and after school programs because they are unable to find qualified staff. High staff turnover is a fact of life in child care, but the situation is growing worse every day. Low unemployment rates and low wages for child care workers have not allowed Red Deer Child Care to replace staff.

Closure of more programs is imminent. These closures will not only impact the immediate families but will have a domino effect on the rest of the community and the province. If parents do not have consistent, safe child care, they are left with few choices: not working or leaving their children in unsupervised situations. Employers pay the price, too, with increased absenteeism at work as parents try to juggle their lack of before and after school child care.

Before and after school child care is a concern for all communities in Alberta. If we believe that it takes a whole village to raise a child, then this is a time when the whole community needs to work together. Corporations, governments, and communities should come to the table together to brainstorm for solutions to this mutual concern. Perhaps industry and small business need to adopt flexible hours for employees with children. Perhaps corporate sponsorship of before and after school programs is a solution. Perhaps volunteerism has a role to play in this issue. Perhaps more government funding is also part of the solution. There is more than one solution to a concern that affects everyone.

Mr. Speaker, for the sake of our children, our communities, and our economy it's time to come to the table together to find the solutions to a safe and sustainable before and after school child care system.

University of Calgary Achievements

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to speak today on some of the accomplishments of the University of Calgary as it reaches the milestone of 40 years of autonomy. In its 40 years as an independent, public university the U of C has grown in status until it has become one of Canada's pre-eminent teaching and research universities.

In teaching the university has gone from an enrolment of 4,000 in 1966 to over 27,000 today. During the same time period the number of graduate students exploded over twelvefold, from 334 to over 4,200. Degrees granted went from 635 in 1966 to over 6,200 last year, bringing the total to more than 110,000 graduates who have received their degrees from the U of C and who have gone on to contribute to the growth and prosperity of our province. The

university now offers over 2,400 different credit and noncredit courses, and its library holdings now exceed 2 and a half million books and periodicals.

In the field of research in the most recent fiscal year the U of C brought in over \$280 million in research revenue, which places it among the top seven universities in Canada. In many diverse areas, including petroleum geology, civil engineering, anthropology, chemistry, and medicine, important discoveries and breakthroughs have been made which have pushed back the frontiers of knowledge, enriched our province and our country, and contributed to the greater public good. Last year the U of C received record donations of \$70 million, bringing its total endowments to \$330 million, which is among the top 10 in Canada.

But the University of Calgary is not content to rest on its laurels or to maintain the status quo. Under the inspired leadership of President Harvey Weingarten the University of Calgary is boldly moving forward towards a vision of the future. The U of C is proceeding with innovative ideas which will focus the university on areas of excellence and which will meet the aspirations of the people of the city and the province in which it lives.

I'm sure all hon. members will join me in congratulating the faculty, staff, and students on the success of their gala last evening, which had a sellout crowd of 750 Calgarians, including our Minister of Advanced Education, our Minister of Health and Wellness, and our Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. I look forward to the bold and innovative plans that they have outlined for the future of the University of Calgary.

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

Proportional Representation

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today, to continue my changing the face of democracy in Alberta series, I wanted to talk more about B.C.'s citizens' assembly. As I mentioned before, the assembly members settled on the single transferrable vote system as the best suited for British Columbia's purposes. The people of that province, represented through the assembly, wanted to revitalize their democracy. The government wanted to encourage more participation and to offer the assurance that no vote is wasted and that all voices are heard.

We know, and the people in B.C. knew, that opponents of proportional representation usually raise flags with respect to the perceived or anticipated threat to effective local representation and the possibility of growing party powers through the use of central candidate lists. The B.C. citizens' assembly heard those very concerns as they studied the different models and came up with the idea that is proportional representation within each constituency, not throughout the province; that is to say, outcomes are still going to be determined locally, not dictated centrally or top down.

The recommendation was that constituencies would be merged or combined into larger electoral districts to be represented by multiple MLAs. In large, densely populated urban ridings you can have up to six or seven MLAs while in rural areas only two or three would be needed. The actual overall number of MLAs will not change from their current total of 79 members. The Premier would still be the leader of the party winning the most seats, but cabinets can now include members from other parties, and coalition governments would be encouraged in situations with close vote counts.

A referendum was held in B.C. in May of 2005, and when the numbers were tallied, 77 of the 79 constituencies and 57.8 per cent of those who voted supported proportional representation. The idea

fell slightly short of the arbitrary 60 per cent approval threshold chosen by the Premier. When asked, the people who voted against it simply explained that they needed more information. You see, there was no funding for educating the electors, and the work done was voluntary by the citizens' assembly alumni, who acted as ambassadors to their communities and tried to explain the merits of their decision.

That proposal is going to be reconsidered in 2008 in the municipal elections and, if successful, is going to be implemented in the 2009 provincial elections.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

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

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to present a petition of 175 names of students and staff from the Sir John Franklin school in my riding of Calgary-East. This school is located in the community of Mayland Heights. They are petitioning the Legislative Assembly to take measures to reduce the number of teen smokers in Alberta.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to present a petition from 11 residents of central Alberta from the Olds, Carstairs, Bowden, Sundre, and Penhold areas. It says:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to introduce effective and immediate measures to curtail the substantial increase in teenage smoking in Alberta as reported by Health Canada, that include but are not limited to; (1) a tobacco tax increase, (2) legislation to control tobacco sales and marketing, and (3) legislation to make all workplaces completely smoke-free.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, I rise to table 104 names from the Calgary area calling on the Legislature to consider increasing funding in order that all Alberta Works income support benefit levels may be increased.

Dr. B. Miller: I'd like to present a petition by 98 citizens who also urge the government of Alberta to "consider increasing funding in order that all Alberta Works income support benefit levels may be increased."

2:50

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I am tabling a petition from citizens across the province but mainly from Edmonton and Sherwood Park urging the government to, number one, abandon its plans to implement the third way health care reforms; two, defeat legislation allowing expansion of private, for-profit hospitals in Alberta and permitting doctors to practise in both the private and public systems; three, oppose any action by the government of Alberta that would contravene the Canada Health Act; and four, vote against plans that would force Albertans to pay for private health insurance.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm privileged to present a petition to this Assembly with 28 signatures from the Cardston-Taber-Warner constituency. The petition reads:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to introduce effective and immediate measures to curtail the substantial increase in teenage smoking in Alberta as reported by Health Canada, that include but are not limited to; (1) a tobacco tax increase, (2) legislation to control tobacco sales and marketing, and (3) legislation to make all workplaces completely smoke-free.

head: **Notices of Motions**

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to give oral notice today of the following motion:

Be it resolved that the following changes to the following committees be approved by the Assembly: on the Select Standing Committee on Public Accounts that Mr. Griffiths replace Mr. VanderBurg as deputy chair, that Mr. Groeneveld replace Mr. Oberle, that Dr. Brown be added; on the Select Standing Committee on the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund that Mr. Johnston replace Mr. McFarland; on the Select Standing Committee on Legislative Offices that Mr. Strang become deputy chair, that Mr. Mitzel replace Mr. Ducharme; on the Select Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing that Mr. Oberle replace Mr. Groeneveld; on the Select Standing Committee on Private Bills that Mr. Webber replace Mr. VanderBurg, that Mr. Rogers replace Mr. Oberle; on the Select Special Standing Committee on Members' Services that Mr. Knight become deputy chair, that Mr. Lindsay replace Mr. Horner, that Mr. Lukaszuk replace Mr. McFarland.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

Bill 29
Environmental Protection and
Enhancement Amendment Act, 2006

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill, being Environmental Protection and Enhancement Amendment Act, 2006.

This bill would bring forth six amendments. The first amendment provides authority for a new regulation to allow the electrical sector to conduct emissions trading in nitrogen oxide and sulphur dioxide. This amendment will help make Alberta's air emissions controls some of the toughest in North America. It reflects a consensus among industry, government, and nongovernment stakeholders as well as the recommendations of the clean air strategic alliance.

The second amendment clarifies industry's obligations to report and remediate contaminated sites closed before the EPEA was enacted. This amendment ensures that any closed sites that continue to have an adverse effect on the environment are reported and cleaned up.

The third amendment allows us to improve our programs for reclamation of coal and oil sands mines and ensures that we promote and acknowledge progressive and ongoing reclamation of these sites.

Mr. Speaker, the next three amendments would, number one, streamline the approvals process by supporting continued use of codes of practice for activities with low environmental impact, give Alberta Environment the flexibility to partner with a broad range of organizations and individuals to deliver our environmental protection mandate, and, number three, increase the amount of environmental information Albertans can obtain without the need for a

formal request through the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

I ask for support on these amendments.

[Motion carried; Bill 29 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that Bill 29, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Amendment Act, 2006, be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

Bill 33

Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2006

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 33, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2006. This being a money bill, His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to this Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, this act will increase the basic spousal and eligible dependant tax credit amounts by \$100 on top of inflation-proofing, or indexing, for a total increase of \$376. These large tax credit amounts are the highest by far in Canada, and they are the key reason why over 1 million of Alberta's 2.36 million tax filers pay no provincial income tax. It will also reflect changes in federal legislation and implement miscellaneous housekeeping changes.

[Motion carried; Bill 33 read a first time]

Bill 34

Alberta Corporate Tax Amendment Act, 2006

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 34, the Alberta Corporate Income Tax Amendment Act, 2006. This being a money bill, His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, between 2001 and 2004 we reduced our general corporate income tax rate from 15.5 per cent to 11 and a half per cent. The small business rate was at that time cut in half to 3 per cent, and small business income threshold was doubled to \$400,000. This act will reduce the general corporate income tax rate to 10 per cent from 11.5 per cent and, again, will also reflect changes in federal legislation and implement miscellaneous housekeeping changes.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 34 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

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

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table a document containing nearly 20,000 signatures of Albertans. Now, that's a petition. I recognize that petitions and documents as such cannot influence matters before courts. Judges, crown prosecutors, and the officers of the court must be free and act without any interference. However, these Albertans have clearly expressed their view that the rules on bail restrictions for those charged with serious

offences should be reviewed. It is appropriate, then, Mr. Speaker, that a policy of this petition be accepted.

As bail in a Criminal Code matter is under the purview of the federal government . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, I have repeatedly said: let's be very, very precise with tablings. Table it.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you.

Mr. Horner: On behalf of the Minister of Environment, Mr. Speaker, I request leave to table Alberta Environment's Standard for Baseline Water-Well Testing for Coalbed Methane/Natural Gas in Coal Operations. This is part of the Water for Life strategy's goal of safe, secure drinking water and supplies. I have the requisite number of copies here.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings today, and they're all concerning questions from earlier today in question period. The first is a reference document indicating the sale of the land 4, 25, 53, 21, southwest quarter in the restricted development area for \$6.2 million. This happened in 1981.

The second tabling I have is from the Alberta Government Services land titles office. It's a transfer of land from the province to Lehigh Portland Cement Limited for \$1,800,000, and this document is dated the 30th of March, 1999.

The last document I have is from the Alberta Government Services land titles office, and it is a transfer of land from Lehigh Portland Cement Limited to the Canadian National Railway Company. This document is dated the 18th day of March, 1999, and the sale of this land includes the price of \$1,700,000.

Thank you.

3:00

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A number of individual letters from people, the first from Dr. David Fleiger wondering what is the devil in the details around allowing doctors to practise in both systems at the same time.

Next, from Roxanne Felix noting: how will the government measure that all people receive the same quality of service, and what are the outcomes for that?

From Robert Evans noting that in the U.S. a middle-class family member hospitalized for a week had a bill of \$45,000. He's against private health insurance.

From Hank and Sharon Espeseth a number of questions but asking: "How is the average citizen to pay health [care insurance] premiums from limited income? And what about pre-existing conditions?"

From Diann Duthie giving her experiences, that her care surpassed that of a friend's who received it at the Gimbel clinic and raising the concerns of doctors as salesmen.

From Lana and Andy Dong asking for clarification on how doctors practising in both systems can be efficient and cost-effective.

From Harvey Dick and Laurette Lund noting a number of points but the first being that private for-profit clinics "will take all of the easy, high margin surgeries . . . leaving the more costly procedures for the Public system."

From Melanie Crisfield noting that "as a society, we should value the health and productivity of all Albertans," that this will not happen with private care.

From T. and E. Cliff, noting that with a scheme the poor could sell their place in the queue to make money, and that would be taxable, so the province could make additional money on it.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have one letter to table, with the appropriate copies: a letter from a constituent, Michelle Chaloner, in which she asks about the third way and points out that it will "undermine Alberta's public health care system."

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table a letter from Judith Da Silva. Ms Da Silva is very concerned about funding cuts for adults with developmental disabilities. In particular, she is concerned that this will cause staffing shortages due to low wages and that further staff shortages will make it impossible to adequately help individuals to "become productive and intricate parts of their communities." My colleagues and I have received over 80 such letters.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table appropriate copies of a letter dated April 3, 2006, sent from the Prime Minister to the Premier of this province. In the letter the Prime Minister notes that allowing doctors to practise in the public and private systems would create conflicts of interest, allow queue-jumping, and encourage rural physicians to move to urban centres.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The first tabling today is a letter from a senior citizen, E. P. Ellis, expressing strong opposition to the third way and urging the government to study the recommendations of Roy Romanow, which could help sustain the public health care system.

The second tabling is from Ms Valerie Shell with respect to funding for persons with developmental disabilities. She disagrees with the minister of health, who claimed that Alberta is seen as heaven, because that description doesn't extend to her daughter's situation.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Two tablings today. The first, another third way letter from a constituent, Anne McCracken, concerned about the impact of the NAFTA agreement and also whether or not we can have fair administration of public funds in a system that allows doctors to work both the public and private sides.

The second tabling this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, is the appropriate number of copies of a freedom of information request from the Official Opposition to the Department of Gaming. It would appear as if this is further oral or verbal consulting services supplied by Rod Love to the Minister of Gaming.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have five tablings, all regarding Bill 206, Designation of Child Access Exchange Centres Act, the first one from the Boys and Girls Club, pleased to offer their community-based sites as potential designated and assigned approved sites.

One from Southside Pentecostal Assembly, again, offering their facilities.

A couple from Ontario in support: one from Fathers are Capable Too, a parenting association; a further one from the Canadian Children's Rights Council, who wrote in support of Bill 206.

The last one is from Jim Baccari, who signs as a friend to ECMAS, MERGE, and MESA, hoping that this will help parents find a common ground for co-parenting their children.

head: **Statement by the Speaker**
Order Paper Changes

The Speaker: Hon. members, before calling Orders of the Day, I'd like to draw to the attention of all hon. members the Order Paper. There are some modifications in today's Order Paper to reflect various appointments and resignations which took place last week.

Bill 12, the Land Titles Amendment Act, 2006, currently at third reading stage and introduced by the former Minister of Government Services, now appears under the name of the new Minister of Government Services.

Bill 15, International Interests in Mobile Aircraft Equipment Act, now in Committee of the Whole and introduced by the former Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations, was changed April 4, 2006, to reflect the name of the acting minister. The bill now appears under the name of the new Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations.

Motions Other than Government Motions 520, 544, and 577 have been withdrawn to reflect the appointments of the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne and the hon. Member for Little Bow to Executive Council.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Motions for Returns**

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, April 6, it is my pleasure to move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: **Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading**

**Bill 203
Railway (Alberta) (Heritage Railway)
Amendment Act, 2006**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and move third reading of Bill 203, the Railway (Alberta) (Heritage Railway) Amendment Act, 2006.

During the first two stages members on both sides of this Chamber supported this bill and what it is trying to achieve. Some hon. members spoke of the importance of trains in opening the west and, more specifically, Alberta's railway heritage and its impact in our 100-year history. Some members also discussed the success of the four existing operations which preserve and recreate our rail heritage. The Alberta Central Railway Museum, the Alberta Railway Museum, Fort Edmonton Park, and Heritage Park have done a great job of not only maintaining working heritage rolling stock but also of recreating the rail experience of yesteryear for many Albertans.

We also had some questions raised by hon. members, and I would like to take this opportunity to address these questions now. The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie had a number of questions, and I will answer these in the order in which they were raised by my colleague. Mr. Speaker, the member raised a question about the definition of a heritage railway, which includes the following: a railway that is "comprised of rolling stock and structural facilities, any of which was manufactured in 1965 or earlier." This part of the definition was recommended by stakeholders, and I understand that it is in tune with the age of the equipment presently being used by the operators of railroad park museums.

The second question which was raised by the member was concerning the last part of the definition of a heritage railway. This section of the definition reads that a heritage railway "is operated for the sole purpose of providing rides to individuals and is not operated for the purposes of transporting goods or commodities for a toll or a fee or of being a common carrier." The intent here is pretty clear. It is true that the Alberta Central Railway charges fees for rides, but even in that statement, we can see that they are charging for a ride, not for transporting goods or people between destinations. If this were the case, then the railway would be considered a public railway.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

3:10

A third question raised by the member was asking for a clarification between a heritage railway and an amusement railway. The main distinction between the two is the age of the rolling stock which is being used in the park. An amusement railway can use any age of equipment which they choose. It does not have to have been manufactured before a certain point in time. Quite the opposite when we talk about heritage railways.

The entire drive behind introducing this legislation is to better recognize the contribution which is made by heritage railway operators in preserving pieces of Alberta's heritage. This is accomplished by adding the heritage railway category in the Railway (Alberta) Act, around which regulations appropriate to the historical railway equipment will be written. At present railways in park settings fall under the same regulations as national carriers.

The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie asked for an example of how present regulations do not work for heritage railways. The best example which I can think of has been raised by many of my colleagues and has to do with track inspection. At present the operators of the Alberta Central Railway Museum must inspect their track twice a week. This operation runs two trips daily, five days per week for five months of the year. This means a total of 10 trips per week in a train which does not exceed 10 miles per hour. In comparison, national carriers CN and CP also need to inspect their track twice a week; however, these rails are carrying far heavier loads at much higher speeds, and there are more than 10 trains passing over these rail lines in a week. This is only one example,

but it illustrates the difficulties which are being experienced by the operators of heritage railways.

By reducing the difficulties facing heritage railways, this bill has the potential to lower the expenses for the operators of the affected railways. It is the intent that the department of infrastructure will work with the stakeholders after the passage of this bill to draft appropriate regulations to their operations. These regulations would of course be drafted in a way that safety remains the highest priority. Having said that, there can be operational requirements which these railways are currently meeting which are likely unnecessary. If these requirements are altered to suit the needs and operations of the railway affected, then there can be cost savings. Regulations and safety requirements are necessary, but it is paramount that they are appropriate to the function of the equipment and operators to which they are being applied.

Mr. Speaker, through Bill 203 we will be assisting vintage railway operators in this province. The idea for Bill 203 was brought forward by the operators of heritage railways, and they have been consulted in the drafting of this legislation. In every discussion with the operators it has been stressed time and again that safety is the number one concern, and Bill 203 will not change this. The organizations which operate heritage railways do a great service for Albertans in preserving our railway history and by providing our citizens the opportunity to ride the rails as early Albertans did.

I'd like to thank all my colleagues on both sides of this Chamber for their support and for the questions which were raised during the debate. I ask that they once again support Bill 203 and pass it through third reading.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really am pleased to be able to speak to Bill 203, the purpose of which is to take into consideration the difficulty of the Alberta Central Railway Museum as well as the three other active sites in Alberta that utilize vintage equipment on full-gauge tracks. These include the lines at Fort Edmonton Park, Calgary Heritage Park, and the Alberta Railway Museum.

By creating a heritage railway designation under the Railway (Alberta) Act, we will build a platform to free them from the unnecessary burdens they currently face. By following this legislation with more appropriate regulations, we will be giving them a chance to operate under more fitting guidelines but will not be giving them free reign that could possibly endanger the visitors and riders. I think that railways have a very strong connection to our past and teach us a lot about the history of our province and how it developed, and they can also teach us about the future and how, in fact, they will come back to serve us again here in Alberta. Effort to support the continued use of trains is worthwhile.

I have a number of observations about the subject matter of this bill and the intent of this bill. First, it recognizes the principle that one size does not fit all. This is true for the special class of railways we're discussing here that have vintage equipment, often of wooden construction, slow speeds, and low tonnages. However, it is also true at other levels of the rail industry.

Last year, in addition to the Wabamun spill here, there were some serious derailments in B.C., including two on trestle bridges on the British Columbia Railway. One of these spilled toxic chemicals that killed virtually all the fish downstream in the Cheakamus River. The British Columbia Railway was recently taken over by CN, but it is not built to Canadian National standards. Many of the bridges are wooden grasshopper trestles built out of the sides of canyons and

mountain slopes. Its curves are tight, and some of the grades are steep. However, CN was attempting to operate this line with milelong, heavy freight trains as it does on its transcontinental main lines. The Canadian Transportation Safety Board recognized this. In its report on the accidents it restricted CN to trains of 80 car lengths in this territory in the future.

A parallel situation existed in Alberta in the former Central Western Railway that ran 20 years ago. Central Western was able to operate a line that CN had found unprofitable by working on different scale. Instead of maintaining a dozen distinct trains with separate staff on each, workers doubled up and did different jobs on alternate days. They ran trains two to three days a week, cut the grass along the track, and did shop work on the equipment the other two to three days. They could save costs here, but they had to lay more out in other areas. For instance, because the track was of older, lighter steel, it could not handle the heavy grain trains that operated the main lines on the major carriers. Even the large grain cars from these trains could only be filled to two-thirds of their normal capacity. These are examples of differences in operating conditions between different freight railways that are common carriers.

Then, there are different standards for passenger operations. Passenger trains are shorter and lighter than today's heavy freight trains. This means they can start and stop more quickly and travel at higher speeds. A line that is designed primarily for passenger traffic will have a number of features different from a freight line, including banking to prevent people and dishes being thrown to the outside edge on curves. A freight line that is used to handle passenger trains must either upgrade its trackage to this standard or limit them to lower operating speeds.

I have fond memories of travelling on the train 23 years ago. Two weeks ago I also had the opportunity to join a group of friends for a day trip to the mountains on Via Rail's train the Canadian. I was impressed by the atmosphere, the decor, the food, and the service. The dome and dining cars, built in the 1950s and refurbished, are only semi wheelchair accessible, yet the staff proved very adept at manoeuvring me through passageways and up and down stairs. I understand that handling special-needs passengers is part of their training and is upgraded regularly. I strongly urge any member of this Assembly to support the retention and increase of this service from three times weekly to daily as Via would like to do in time for the 2010 Olympics. It is an excellent way to see the country, meet people, and reduce the traffic on our roads.

Regular passenger services, heritage railways, heavy haul, and short line freight operations all have different conditions and point to the need that underlines Bill 203. Canada's two major railways, Canadian National and Canadian Pacific, led the continent in the size and efficiency of their operations. They have achieved this position by maximizing what they do well: hauling heavy, long-distance, bulk freight commodities. But because they are good at what they do and serve a vast majority of the market does not mean that their operational standards should apply to everyone. Mr. Speaker, our legislative framework must address all needs and situations, and that is what this bill is trying to do.

3:20

While supporting, I have a couple of questions that perhaps the hon. member can answer at another time. Of the four Alberta heritage railways he cites, two, Fort Edmonton Park and Heritage Park Calgary, are freestanding lines; that is, they do not directly connect to any other railways. Any equipment, locomotives, or coaches brought in and out must be loaded by crane onto flatbeds and hauled by truck. The other two lines, Alberta central and the

Alberta rail museum, do connect to the railway grid, one to CP and the other to CN. This means they can receive and send out equipment by rail if it meets interchange standards or if the railways agree to handle it under special conditions. My point is: is the difference whether a heritage line connects with other rail lines not as important as the distinction between a heritage railway and a common or statutory carrier? Is this a difference, or should it be recognized, perhaps, in this legislation?

My second point is about the maximum speed on heritage railways; 30 kilometres per hour translates to about 20 miles per hour. North American railways, Canadian ones included, still use miles as a unit of measurement, and 12 to 13 miles per hour, which is what 20 kilometres per hour comes to, I believe is below the speed at which some excursion trains operate using heritage equipment. I believe the 30 kilometre per hour maximum for heritage trains operating in rural areas, with longer stretches of track than Fort Edmonton and Heritage Park conditions, where they can operate faster without risk to people on the ground that comes in an urban park setting is reasonable.

I am happy to endorse Bill 203 and the sector of heritage preservation that it benefits. I think Bill 203 achieves the desired end in a simple way and at the same time gives these historic sites the designation of heritage railway, which is accurate, fitting, and worthwhile.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to join the debate on Bill 203, the Railway (Alberta) (Heritage Railway) Amendment Act, 2006, sponsored by the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose. This bill would amend the Railway (Alberta) Act to create a new heritage designation for railways that meet certain criteria.

Bill 203 would currently apply to four historical railway attractions in our province: the Alberta Railway Museum, Fort Edmonton Park, Calgary's Heritage Park, and the Central Alberta Railway Museum. These railways are currently classified as amusement railways and must often adhere to regulatory standards that are intended for different usage. The object of this legislation is to create a new set of rules that would be more appropriate for these railways. The creation of a new heritage designation would allow greater flexibility in the operation of railways located at these historical attractions. By reducing some of the cumbersome rules and regulations that often burden these railways, they would be able to cut down on operating costs associated with overregulation. This would lead to potential savings from maintenance costs, which could be redirected to other vital areas.

When there is talk of regulatory change, many people often assume that there will be a corollary drop in safety standards. However, hon. members can rest assured that that will not be the case for these railways, Mr. Speaker, for at least as far as rules and regulations relating to safety are concerned, standards that are appropriate to the speed and the operations of those railways will be taken into consideration. Safety will obviously remain the number one priority for these railways and for the government, and any future regulatory changes will be sure to reflect the priority of safety.

The new rules that would result from the creation of a heritage railway designation would not compromise the safety standards in place at tourist attractions. The Department of Infrastructure and Transportation would work with stakeholders and other agencies to develop appropriate rules, regulations, and standards that would better reflect the unique nature of these railways. New regulations

would be more indicative of the operational realities of these heritage railways. Regulations and rules are not one size fits all, and this bill would reduce some of the unnecessary red tape.

This would be consistent with one of the goals articulated in this year's throne speech, which announced the government's commitment to undertake a comprehensive regulatory review intended to review and identify unneeded rules and regulations.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 203 could also increase the potential for heritage railways to better maintain the character and historical nature of the trains that they operate. I'd like to offer one example to illustrate this point. For example, current regulations could require a specific type of brakes or a specific type of crossing warning system to be used in conjunction with the operation of these railways, and these particular mechanisms might be more expensive than required – by mainline railways such as CP Rail or CN Rail. While they might be necessary for trains that travel at higher speeds and that cross highways or transport people or goods over long distances, they may not be required for the purposes of slow-moving locomotives at the Alberta Railway Museum, for example, which are used to provide rides to visitors.

Under new regulations for heritage railways the original integrity of the trains could be enhanced. The regulations could allow for more use of original equipment. Moreover, the potential savings on maintenance costs could allow the Alberta Railway Museum to be better maintained in its more original and more authentic state.

Over time the importance of trains in our society has diminished, and steam locomotives are no longer the engines driving our economy, so to speak. New technologies and improvements to our highways have lessened the prevalence of railways in our society. There may be fewer lines today, but the tourist destinations that would benefit from heritage designation would ensure that railways and the past are not forgotten.

Mr. Speaker, we do have a responsibility to do all that we can to protect this part of our history. We need to ensure that future generations of Albertans understand and enjoy this once prominent part of our heritage. I want future Albertans to know and love the distinct sound of the steam engine as it travels down the rail tracks sounding its whistle. Bill 203 provides an excellent opportunity to aid this noble pursuit. The designation of heritage railways and the subsequent reduction of the overregulation and obstacles encumbering these railways assists these historical tourist attractions in maintaining the high level of service and historic value that Albertans have come to expect.

The heritage railway designation would do more than aid affected railways through regulatory change. It is also a symbolic gesture that would show a commitment to preserving this important part of our history. The new heritage designation could breathe a new life into Alberta's historical railway attractions. The debate surrounding this bill and the subsequent changes may raise the profile of these attractions and draw more Albertans out to enjoy the Alberta Railway Museum, Alberta Central Railway Museum, Heritage Park, and Fort Edmonton Park. The heritage designation could also add further credibility to these railways and generate further interest among Albertans eager to learn more about our history.

Regulatory changes resulting from Bill 203 could facilitate the creation of more heritage railways by reducing the red tape and may even result in the future establishment of more museums and tourist attractions dedicated to historical trains.

Mr. Speaker, there are many valid reasons for supporting Bill 203. I'm very supportive of this bill, and I urge fellow members to support the bill in third reading.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me pleasure to rise today in order to join the discussion regarding Alberta's heritage railways. The operators of these facilities need us to redesignate these railways so that they are not faced with excessive costs in trying to obey standards that were not designed for them in the first place. It is unreasonable for us to expect the operators of these small railways to follow the rules set out for big operators like CP Rail and CN Rail.

These parks are not making excessive profits on train rides by any stretch of the imagination, Mr. Speaker. In some cases rides on these historic trains are free with admission to the park or museum. In order for these groups to follow the rules, costs must be incurred for an individual to inspect the lines a certain number of times a week or perform other tasks that these regulations demand. I do not believe it would be unreasonable for new legislation to be passed in order to create more appropriate standards for these heritage railways.

3:30

Safety would of course still be a first priority, Mr. Speaker. Albertans need not be concerned as to the safety of these railways after they have been redesignated from amusement railways to heritage railways. These rules would be specific to these railways but would still provide for safe operation. They would simply be specific to heritage railways. The safety of these railways would in no way be compromised.

Mr. Speaker, our heritage railways are an important part of our history. They give our children an idea of what the west was like in the past when trains crossed the vast expanse that was the new frontier. Trains were a fixture in our communities, and it would be a tragedy to lose this part of our heritage.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to take a minute to discuss some of the history and facts about one of the parks with a heritage railway that would benefit from Bill 203 and the eventual creation of appropriate regulations for these small operators. The railway I would like to discuss is that of the railway at Fort Edmonton Park. The train running in this park is a remnant of the train that began running in 1902, over a hundred years ago. The train was run by Edmonton, Yukon and Pacific Railway, or EY & P Railway, whose operations carried them throughout the Edmonton area. This railway carried passengers until the middle of the 1920s and ceased its main operations in 1951. The railway did continue to be used as a spur line as opposed to a main trunk line, however, until the 1970s.

Most of the railway cars date back to 1905 or 1913 and were purchased from the Northern Alberta Railway. The most impressive part of the train, the locomotive, was built in the early 1900s in Pittsburgh by the Baldwin Locomotive Works. It took a whole year for the park to restore this piece of the train. Originally the locomotive was used in the state of Louisiana. For 50 years it pulled both passengers and freight.

Mr. Speaker, at present the park offers rides for free on the former EY & P Railway, stopping at both the entrance to the park and at the rear of the park, where the fort is located. This train is a moving timepiece, capturing the essence and the spirit of a day long ago.

Mr. Speaker, these railways are there to teach our children and youth about trade and the building of our province and western Canada in general. Without these railways Alberta would not be the province it is today. There may be some individuals who believe that the current rules work fine for these operators as they have the option to apply for exemptions from them. Those involved do not feel, however, that the system is very responsive. Therefore, why not create legislation that deals with their needs separately? Why not create legislation that would actually be geared towards these heritage railways? Why make these parks and museums follow

standards that were not designed for them in the first place? In most cases these railways are only part of a park's or museum's historical offerings. In Fort Edmonton Park they have buildings and streets dedicated to different time periods such as 1885 Street, 1905 Street, and 1920 Street, for example.

Mr. Speaker, this park charges a very reasonable fee for entrance to its facilities. I do not think that this park or any other facility can afford to focus a great percentage of their time and funding on following rules originally designed for railways such as Canadian National or Canadian Pacific. We would be doing our children a great disservice if we did not try to help out these facilities by creating legislation designed for them particularly. These four historical trains at Fort Edmonton Park, Alberta Railway Museum, Calgary Heritage Park, and Alberta Central Railway Museum are providing our kids with the opportunity to ride a full-size train. This is an opportunity they may not otherwise have.

All full-size trains are regulated under the Railway (Alberta) Act. However, under the current legislation there is no special designation for heritage railways. This bill, the Railway (Alberta) (Heritage Railway) Amendment Act, has been proposed to address this need.

Mr. Speaker, I support the small heritage businesses in this province, and I would happily endorse reasonable changes that would support them. As MLAs for Alberta I suggest that we come together in order to create legislation that will have a positive effect on these important historical facilities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Stony Plain.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and join the debate on Bill 203, the Railway (Alberta) (Heritage Railway) Amendment Act, 2006, sponsored by the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose. Alberta's railroads are an integral part of the heritage of this province. From the late 19th century, when the first railroad was struck in Alberta, to the present day railways have served as an important link between the people and the communities of Alberta. My own father participated in laying railroads across Alberta. Not only did railroads aid early settlers to Alberta in founding the communities that now make up the province, but they also allowed for the marketing and transporting of the goods and ideas necessary to sustain these communities.

Mr. Speaker, the heritage of this province is something that we as Albertans cherish. Creating tangible links to our past allows us to see where we came from and contributes to the overall vitality and richness of life in our province. Unfortunately, preserving our heritage is something that can often be extremely costly and burdensome to nonprofit groups that choose to take on this important responsibility. This is particularly true with respect to the preservation of railways.

The present legislation governing Alberta's railways often compounds this challenge in that it simply does not take into account the operating realities for our heritage railways. Under the current legislation Alberta's heritage railways adhere to the same standards and operating procedures as national carriers such as CN, CP, and Via Rail. It simply is not realistic to expect these organizations to continue to operate in this manner. Bill 203 will rectify this situation by creating a designation that recognizes the special contribution that Alberta's heritage railways make to the cultural and historical mosaic of this province and that will better reflect the operating realities that organizations responsible for preserving these railways face. Only railways that were constructed prior to 1965 and which are not used for commercial purposes will be eligible for this designation.

Presently the Railway (Alberta) Act, 2002, stipulates that all railways operating in the province fall into one of three classifications. These classifications are industrial, public railways, and amusement railways. At present heritage railways typically fall within the amusement railway classification. This is problematic for a number of reasons.

Firstly, amusement railroads must follow the same rules as railways operating on mainline track. This means that, for example, heritage railway operators must inspect their tracks twice per week. This is perhaps not necessary as heritage railways operate at far lower speeds, much less frequency, and over considerably lesser distances than do railways which operate on mainline track. Moreover, it is not reasonable to expect organizations operating on very limited budgets and with a very short yearly operating period to perform inspections this frequently.

Secondly, the current legislation affords very little flexibility to the operators of heritage railways. In order to apply for any exemptions to the current legislation, heritage railway operators must go through a time-consuming process. This process wastes valuable resources that could be put to use to maintain and better their current railways and enhance their value as historic sites.

Finally, the current system misclassifies an important aspect of our province's history. Generally speaking, heritage railways are currently classified as amusement railways. Certainly, it is not to categorize an important part of Alberta's historical legacy as amusement. Mr. Speaker, there is nothing amusing about this classification. To describe heritage railways in this way is in effect to lessen the value of our province's past. We must simply find a way to more effectively capture the significant contribution that railways have made to this province.

Bill 203 will help to remedy this current situation by creating a system that recognizes the historical value of railways, is responsive to stakeholders, and accurately reflects the operational realities faced by our heritage railway operating groups. By creating a specific classification for heritage railways, we will ensure a system that is able to flexibly respond to current and future challenges posed to heritage railroad operators. A separate classification will allow for regulations that are specifically tailored to the needs of heritage railway operators and the environment in which they must work.

3:40

Recent events such as the CN spill that occurred in my constituency at Lake Wabamun in August of '05 have highlighted the need to keep our railways safe. Some concern has been raised that this bill would compromise public safety and our environment by lessening the standards that railway operators must face. Indeed, the contrary is true. By creating a separate designation for heritage railways, we will be able to create safety standards that better reflect the unique operating environment of these railways. Moreover, by separating heritage railways from mainline commercial and industrial operators, we will be able if necessary to strengthen regulations for these commercial operators to address current safety issues without unduly harming our heritage railways. Ultimately a system that is more responsive and better fitted to the needs of those operating under it will also increase safety for the general public.

I assure you, Mr. Speaker, that there is nothing that is more important to me than the safety of Albertans and the integrity of the environment, and I certainly would not support legislation that would in any way compromise this.

In recent years much progress has been made in the area of legislation that pertains to the railways of Alberta. The creation of the Railway (Alberta) Act in 2002 transferred authority of short-line railways operating in Alberta from the federal government to the

provincial government. This helped to make the system more efficient by localizing it and making it better able to respond to the concern of stakeholders.

While this is certainly an improvement over the previous system, the unfortunate reality is that the position of heritage railway operators was largely overlooked in the creation of this legislation. Thus Bill 203 is really about building on the progress made by the creation of the Railway (Alberta) Act and extending its benefits and efficiencies to the operators of heritage railways. As with many other pieces of legislation the benefit of time has allowed us to see possible shortcomings and areas where improvements can be made.

It is time, Mr. Speaker, for us to make the necessary changes to the act so that our heritage railways can operate in the most efficient way possible and continue to educate Albertans on the meaningful contributions that railways have made to our past, present, and future. I urge all members of this Assembly to support Bill 203 and take decisive action to facilitate the preservation of an important part of our heritage. By passing Bill 203, this House will demonstrate that it is willing to preserve our heritage for future generations to enjoy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today and join the third reading debate on Bill 203, the Railway (Alberta) (Heritage Railway) Amendment Act, 2006. I was very pleased to see so many of my colleagues rising to speak in favour of this bill. I was even more pleased to see the genuine interest expressed in our heritage from both sides of the House. I think that our appreciation for the past is a universal concept, and I commend all hon. members who shared their views on this legislation.

We've heard so many stories and anecdotes, some of which made very definite points about the relevance and importance of this bill. Every Albertan treasures their heritage, and its preservation is a pressing concern.

This is what Bill 203 is attempting to do: to aid a limited and specific group of heritage railroads by providing a separate and distinct classification for them. Those who sacrifice their time and labour for the love of history should be helped in their efforts in every possible way. They shouldn't be subject to undue restrictions and regulations that don't necessarily apply to their situation. With Bill 203 an attempt is being made to advance the interests of Albertans by preserving our past. It is a very simple proposal with very simple intentions.

I would like at this time to address a few of the comments made by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East. I would like to thank the hon. member for sharing with this Assembly her recognition of the importance of heritage and the vital role that the railroad played in our province's past.

I would, however, also like to address the comments made by the hon. member in relation to the insurance coverage that is utilized by the railroads affected by the proposals of Bill 203. A statement was made to the effect that the bill will help reduce, among other things, the insurance costs of railroads affected by the provisions of the bill. I would like to point out that the bill effectively creates a separate classification for the railroads which does not have any direct bearing on the insurance burden they will incur. It may or may not, but this is an issue that will be determined solely by the regulations. Insurance assessment is a departmental responsibility. It is not within the scope or the intent of this bill to set specifics for rate reductions or rate determinations.

There was also a comment made to the effect that a probability existed of non-Canadian insurance companies providing service at

present to currently operating heritage railroads. I cannot answer whether or not that is actually the case, but I would like to clarify that it is completely irrelevant to what is being proposed in Bill 203. The relationship between a historic railroad operation and an insurance company is determined by financial or other considerations and is made wholly outside of the legislative realm. Insurance rates are determined by insurance companies regardless of which country it is located in and are based upon the unique situational operating conditions of the railroad in question and risk assessments done by the appropriate department. Once again, regulations and assessments will be the final determining factor in the insurance costs that are incurred by the railroads. Bill 203 will have no effect on the business practice of insurance companies, and railroads will be able to buy insurance from companies of their choice regardless of whether it is domestic or not.

The hon. member also made reference to a historical railroad in Manitoba, the Prairie Dog Central Railway, and how its situation was similar to what we have in Alberta. I would like to address this point as it is not an entirely fair comparison if made in relation to Bill 203. The Prairie Dog Central Railway operates on a line of tracks in the Winnipeg area and goes from the Inkster junction station to the town of Warren, Manitoba. This is unlike the railroads which are affected by Bill 203, which currently operate entirely within a park setting. Section 2(a)(d.1)(i) states that for the purpose of the bill: "is operated wholly or in part within the confines of an historical park or similar park or site." The Prairie Dog Central Railway travels a considerable distance completely outside of a park setting and is therefore quite unlike the railroads covered under the provisions of Bill 203. It is quite similar to the Alberta Prairie Railway, which operates out of Stettler and which is unaffected by Bill 203. As the train operates over a great distance and passes through populous areas and crosses roads, it was felt to be more appropriate that it not be classified a heritage railroad as defined by that bill.

The railroads affected by Bill 203 operate fully within the parks, parks which bring thousands upon thousands of tourists from around the world to our province. They come to experience our heritage, heritage which has been preserved through the hard work and vision of dedicated Albertans. This tourism gives Alberta international recognition, but more importantly it brings history alive in our own backyard. We don't have to travel halfway around the world to experience the past as it was. We have it alive and well in our own backyard.

Bill 203 recognizes the importance of this heritage while at the same time providing an opportunity for smoother operations of these railroads. By recognizing their unique situations, we are enabling the creation of a new regulation that will have the potential to facilitate the daily operations of these historic treasures. At the end of the day a recognition of history is the purpose of Bill 203. The bill recognizes the importance of the railway in the formation of our province and honours it and our pioneers by helping to preserve it for our children and our children's children.

3:50

As legislators we have the responsibility to represent the best interests of Albertans in all that we do. Private members' bills provide us with a unique opportunity to bring forward issues that are important to our constituents, issues that do not necessarily deal with government policy or so-called big issues like energy revenue or health care. There is a time and place for debate on issues like those, and there is a definite need for private members' bills like Bill 203. With this bill we are seeking to preserve Alberta's heritage, something I feel is worth while debating, something I feel honoured to have been given the opportunity to stand and express my opinion on and, in turn, hear the opinions of other hon. members.

We cannot understand the future without a link to the past, and Alberta's heritage railways provide that link. They provide it for every Albertan, and I'm sure Albertans will agree that we have been representing their best interests in our debate on Bill 203.

In conclusion, I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose for introducing this legislation. Offering our opinions will support preserving the proud heritage of Alberta, and I'll ask all members of the Legislature to join me in doing so.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose for bringing forward this bill. This is a functional bill and one that all members of this Legislature appear to support, as they should.

During the debates in second reading and Committee of the Whole we heard numerous positive comments and personal stories surrounding Alberta's railways and trains generally. From rides on railways as a child to squishing pennies on the tracks, I believe that most members of this Legislature have had some personal experience with trains and the culture, if you will, surrounding them. They are part of our heritage, our past. They brought this province and the whole country together, and many settlers chose to settle in Alberta near the railways because of the increase in opportunities for trade that the railroads provided. Many of our Alberta communities are located where they are because of their proximity to the rail lines. Thus, Mr. Speaker, Alberta's railways have been an integral part of Alberta's heritage and the building of this wonderful province.

Bill 203 will help to preserve this heritage by ensuring that those who still run heritage railways have regulations that apply to their needs in particular. We should not require them to follow regulations designed for the larger railroads, such as CP and CN, when they do not travel the same amount of distance or carry the same types of loads, et cetera. Mr. Speaker, I don't think any of the members of this Legislature dispute the fact. Thus, I would like to take this opportunity to attempt to respond to some of the remarks made by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

The hon. member stated during the Committee of the Whole stage that he wished there were some bills other than Bill 203 that were bills that Albertans want to see. I believe, Mr. Speaker, that Bill 203, the Railway (Alberta) (Heritage Railway) Amendment Act, 2006, is in fact a bill that Albertans want to see. I know that this is true of the stakeholders in this situation, who want to see legislation that is specific to their needs rather than being lumped in with the needs of Alberta's entire railway population. They are Albertans, are they not?

I also believe that Albertans would like to see legislation that promotes the interests of our heritage businesses. Without those operators Albertans may not have the opportunity to enjoy the experience that a ride on a heritage train can bring. Parks such as Fort Edmonton Park and Calgary's Heritage Park provide Albertans with a chance to look back and see what life may have been like for those Albertans that settled here before us. Therefore, I believe, Mr. Speaker, that this is indeed a bill that serves the interests of Albertans.

In mentioning that he would like to see more bills dealing with priorities for Albertans, the hon. member stated that he wanted to see more bills regarding security for transportation. Now, I'm not entirely sure what the hon. member meant by this statement, but I believe that Bill 203 actually does deal with security and transportation. Bill 203 will ensure that the new regulations still have safety in mind when dealing with heritage railways. Bill 211, the Traffic Safety (Mandatory Motorcycle Training) Amendment Act, 2006,

which has gone through first reading, will provide another opportunity for this House to debate transportation issues. I'd also like to point out that in the budget this year spending on Alberta's highways increased \$3.6 billion in order to improve our highways, including the twinning of highway 63. This also brings me to the member's postulation, essentially, that Fort McMurray is getting nothing from this province.

In relation to Bill 203, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie did not state that it was a good bill. I agree that it is a bill that will bring the regulations for those heritage railways in line with their needs and with their usage. The member supported the bill during the Committee of the Whole stage, but mentioned that he would like to see more bills regarding resource policies, savings, prevention of crime, and other issues that are a priority for Albertans.

I believe I have already expressed my reasoning for believing that this bill, Bill 203, is an important issue to Albertans. I also feel that the priorities of Albertans are being looked after in the proposed legislation we have seen in this House this spring session.

In relation to preventing crimes, as the member brought up, we have had numerous bills before this House this session that have allowed for discussion on this point. For example, Bill 3, the Protection Against Family Violence Amendment Act, 2006; Bill 16, the Peace Officer Act; private member's Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Methamphetamine) Amendment Act, 2006; and Bill 207, the Traffic Safety (Driver Disqualification and Seizure of Vehicles Arising from Drug Offences) Amendment Act, 2006, have all provided a great deal of opportunity for discussion on crime prevention.

Mr. Speaker, I feel that in questioning the importance of Bill 203, we do a great disservice to the bill. Bill 203, the Railway (Alberta)(Heritage Railway) Amendment Act is a good piece of legislation and one that will be beneficial to all Albertans by helping out those individuals and groups who run our heritage railways within parks and museums.

In responding to the request that we discuss savings, Mr. Speaker, we as a Legislature have in fact had the opportunity to examine the issue of saving. The budget tabled on March 22, 2006, includes \$4.1 billion that has been allocated to various areas, such as \$1.9 billion to savings and endowments such as the heritage fund and \$325 million to our sustainability fund.

We've covered a number of those issues already that the hon. member wishes to talk about as opposed to bills such as Bill 203, which brings me to the fact, Mr. Speaker, that private members' bills can only address certain issues as there are parameters that they must be brought forth within. If we were to address an issue of appropriation in a private member's bill, that would be against the rules, if you will, because it would then fall into the category of a money bill. As private members we cannot ask that legislation involved in the allocation of the province's funds be created through our private members' bills. I am surprised that the hon. member would even suggest that we try to deal with that in our private members' bills. I am sure that he must know what the limitations are on such bills already. Thus, I think he should understand that the needs of the stakeholders involved in Bill 203 are well suited to discussion through a private member's bill.

These facilities – Fort Edmonton Park, Alberta Railway Museum, Calgary Heritage Park, and Alberta Central Railway Museum – operate on short tracks. They could definitely use a revamp in the standards that require them to follow the same procedure as the large commercial or industrial railways.

Mr. Speaker, our Alberta railways provide a great deal of nostalgia for older Albertans and a source of enjoyment and opportunity for discovering Alberta's rail history for the younger

citizens of this province. Railways brought this great expanse of land that we call Alberta together in a time when travelling great distances was a difficult and challenging feat. They made trade and habitation possible throughout much of this province.

I ask that all members of this Legislature join me today in supporting Bill 203, the Railway (Alberta)(Heritage Railway) Amendment Act. This is an important bill even if all members of the Legislature do not agree that it is so. I'd like to again thank the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose for bringing this bill forward and for all the work that the member and the stakeholders have done in creating this piece of legislation.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Did the Minister of Justice want to speak? There are less than two minutes. I'll recognize you.

4:00

Mr. Stevens: Well, I can certainly in that time period, Mr. Speaker, congratulate the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose for bringing forward what is not only good in policy but good in practice legislation.

Heritage Park for my first two terms was a part of Calgary-Glenmore and now forms part of the northern boundary of the constituency of Calgary-Glenmore. I'm intimately familiar with it. Heritage Park has operated for in excess of 40 years, and for many of those years the heritage railway line that operates there has been operational. I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that they have operated that without any problems, any safety issues, whatsoever.

They in large measure rely on volunteers. I think that each year in excess of 60,000 volunteer hours are put into the park, generally, and many of those are with respect to the railway. Last year somebody came to town, so to speak, and started to suggest that the higher standards applicable to the common carrier railways be applied to Heritage Park. For a period of time there was an issue as to whether or not they would be able to continue to operate their heritage railway.

So, Mr. Speaker, to the hon. member, thank you very much for bringing this forward. I can tell you that the staff and directors of Heritage Park are most appreciative of your good efforts.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose to close debate.

Mr. Johnson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I would like to thank all the stakeholders in our railroad museums for their input into this bill. The need for a special designation that is heritage railroad in the Railroad (Alberta) Act was first raised by them, and I want to recognize them for that. Secondly, I want to thank all the members of this Assembly. There are many of you that have spoken to this particular bill, and to my recollection I believe that all of you have spoken in favour of the bill. I would just encourage all of you to vote in favour of the bill at this time.

[Motion carried; Bill 203 read a third time]

head: **Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

Bill 206

Designation of Child Access Exchange Centres Act

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise this afternoon and begin debate in second reading on Bill 206, Designa-

tion of Child Access Exchange Centres Act. I'm looking forward to the debate today and hope to see many different takes on the issue.

I bring Bill 206 forward to this Assembly because I believe that families are the most important part of this province. Families are not only important; they are vital to the success of our society. There are many types of families in our society: from single-parent families to two-parent families to extended families and community families. There are different families, but the one thing that's vital in all of these families is that there needs to be the presence of both mother and father whenever possible. Both parents need to have a presence in their children's lives. That's my reasoning for bringing Bill 206 forward.

I have been concerned that many of the children in Alberta do not have positive access to both of their parents when a marriage breaks down. In debate today I think we're going to hear a lot about how the divorce rate is on the rise. To me this is extremely unfortunate, but it is a reality of the world we live in today. I realize that marriages break down for many reasons, and I'm not saying that they should all be fixed. My concern is that the children in these broken marriages are often put in the middle of these situations, and there is difficulty in children having access to both parents.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to speak about a couple of things this afternoon that I have found in my research for this bill. First off, it's widely accepted that parental divorce is extremely difficult on children. It puts incredible strain on their lives and does have long-lasting effects. Children are exposed to high levels of stress during the breakup of the family unit, especially when there's a battle between parents for the custody of the children. Once divorce and separation has occurred, the stress levels do not go down but actually rise because they now have to deal with spending time with parents in two different households. What's also found is that this stress level rises higher if there is persistent conflict between parents after separation, especially if conflict continues during the exchange of children. Stress levels rise even further when there is continuing conflict over access to children. Studies have shown that conflict between parents over their children have long-term effects on development, especially into adolescence.

One thing that I would like to mention is that it's often the case that fathers are the ones who are viewed less favourably in terms of access. There is one statistic given by Braver and O'Connell that states that 25 to 35 per cent of custodial mothers try to interfere with a father's visiting rights. As well, Department of Justice statistics show that 48 per cent of nonresident parents do not have regular access to their children and that 25 to 35 per cent of nonresident parents with access orders are denied access to their children. Now, this kind of statistic is alarming, in my opinion. Both parents need to have access to their children, especially when it's granted.

I think that the fathers have to work the hardest to see their children, and in a majority of cases mothers are looked at more favourably in raising children. Now, I don't necessarily disagree with this, but the onus is usually put on the fathers to ensure that they're able to see their children. It's usually the father that has to go and pick up children from his former home in a lot of cases, and this causes much of the conflict in regard to access. This type of conflict is hard on children and hard on the parents as well, especially the noncustodial parent. There are many studies that have also found that fathers stop trying to see their children after so many years of separation because it has become so difficult for them to gain access to the children that they do stop trying.

Like I said before, the onus is on the father to ensure that he can see his children, and this is very difficult and does not help to alleviate the situation of conflict. This is horrible. Children need to see both their parents, and they need influence from both their

parents. Both the mother and father need to see their children, and they need to have influence over how their children are raised. Fathers are vitally important to the life of their children. If the father starts to give up trying to see his kids because it's become too difficult to do so, it has long-term consequences. There are plenty of examples of kids who turn to a life that's not beneficial to society because they lacked the father figure or, conversely, the mother figure in their lives.

I want to stress how important both parents are to the life of a child. When children have the influence of both their mother and their father, they're often raised to be very productive and important members of society because they've had the total, full, support of both their parents. In fact, it has been shown that the number one determinant of whether a child is successful in life is whether or not both parents were involved in that child's life.

That's why I bring this bill forward. This is extremely important to me because I believe that if we allow a place where a mother can drop off her child, where the father can pick up the child without conflict with the ex, the children will be better off. I envision this bill making it easier for noncustodial parents to get access to their children in a positive, conflict-free environment.

I'd like to paint a picture of how I envision this bill working. First off, a family breaks down. During the divorce proceedings the judge decides that the mother gets custody of the children; however, the father gets to see his children every weekend. So mother, weekdays; father, weekends. Fair enough. Now, the way the schedules work is that the father cannot pick up his children from school because he works too late and must go to the home he used to reside in with his wife and kids to pick them up. When the father comes to pick up his children on Friday evening, he walks through the front door to greet his children, and he's met by an ex-wife and quite possibly the new love of the wife. This situation is extremely difficult for fathers, and it's very tough on them to keep their heads held high, especially in the first couple of years after divorce.

4:10

This sort of conflict is very real, and it's one of the reasons why some fathers decided to forgo many of the visits with their own children. It's also a reason for many fathers simply just giving up on access because it's become far too difficult. However, with Bill 206 the judge in the divorce proceedings could order that the mother must take the children, after school perhaps, to a facility designated by the minister where the father could pick up the children. Conversely, an even better situation would be if the mother and father come to the conclusion on their own accord that there is conflict and voluntarily decide to use a designated facility to necessitate access.

This is my main hope for the bill: that families will be able to use these designated facilities voluntarily. This facility could be a daycare, a boys and girls club, or even a church. When the father finishes his work day, he can come and pick up the children without having to face his ex-wife and her new life. I believe this will minimize and pretty much eliminate any kind of emotional conflict that there might have been in other situations.

As well, the staff at a facility would keep documented evidence that the children were dropped off by one parent and were picked up by the other. This way if ever there is a conflict involving access and it comes back to the court, there is third-party, documented proof of the access and the exchanges. If one of the parents does not live up to their end of the agreement, the judge would know this and be able to rule accordingly.

I believe that this bill will help the majority of families in Alberta who are dealing with access issues. This bill is a tool which is meant

to help all those families where one parent has difficulty seeing their children because they're not comfortable going into a home where they possibly once resided. I believe my bill can help families grow stronger even if they are separated. I think it offers children the chance to see both their parents without being stressed out because of tension between the mother and father. Better and easier access allows for happier and healthier children.

I appreciate that there are many views on this topic, and I look forward to hearing all of them this afternoon. My hope is that all members will think critically of this bill and will come to realize how important this can be. I urge all hon. members to support Bill 206 this afternoon.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to speak to Bill 206, Designation of Child Access Exchange Centres Act, and I want to thank the hon. member for bringing this bill forward. I, too, agree that it's very important. The bill facilitates the creation of child-access exchange centres, where the exchange of a child between parents, guardians, or other individuals involved in the life of the child can take place in a neutral, impartial facility. These centres will also ensure that the exchange is documented.

In essence this bill is aimed at making the transition for a child easier when she or he is exchanged between parents or guardians. The logic is that without such centres the exchange of a child often takes place in a confrontational or tense environment, thereby making the transition difficult on the child.

As I'm looking at the suggestions for this bill, I have some questions that I think need to be addressed, like: where are these facilities going to be located? Will there be centres designated in rural communities, northern communities, and aboriginal communities? Will these be government buildings that are going to be designated as centres? What type of agreement are you referring to when you say an agreement between parents or guardians?

I'm wondering, too: where you say that those two persons "are not to be in each other's presence when they exchange . . . the child," will these centres only be available to the individuals who have been ordered not to be in each other's presence during the exchange of a child? Will these centres be available to individuals who may not have a formal order to stay apart but who, regardless, prefer to use the centres as a means of exchange?

The conditions on access to the centre make me wonder, especially that some individuals are going to have to "pay or agree to pay any fee charged by the centre." It seems to me that by making individuals pay to use these centres, we may limit their practicality. It may be more useful to provide the services free of charge, and we do need more elaboration on that.

I recently became acquainted with a young woman who had experience with such an access facility in another jurisdiction. Her family had gone through a very messy divorce in which one parent was awarded sole custody because of the mental instability of the other. Because of the instability factor and the court orders that restricted this parent from normal access, this kind of access centre was the only way the children could have limited contact with the one parent until they reached an age when they could decide for themselves what further contact they would like. It seemed to work in that case, and in the circumstances where these limitations apply, I would support the provisions of this bill.

I want to note in response to the previous member's comments that there are many cases where the father does have the right to access but never uses it, never indicates any desire to use it, although

the mother perhaps would like him to. Of course, we can believe that children should have the love and nurturing of two parents. The reality is that some adults have their own interests as a priority. I can speak of situations where the father has been the stable, caring, and devoted parent, and the mother has pursued her own interests and shown little concern for the children. We need to be careful when we're making assumptions here about the situation the children are dealing with and which parent is taking the responsible, mature, and caring role.

The objective of this bill is a positive one. I believe that creating these centres should reduce the level of stress on a child in a case where the parents or guardians do not get along or have a history of confrontation or violence. It is abusive for children to be involved in those types of situations where they are seeing and hearing violence.

In short, I think these centres will foster a more structured, controlled exchange between parents and guardians and allow those exchanges to be documented, which may be useful for the provincial courts. The provincial courts may find the creation or designation of such supports beneficial as the bill requires that exchange times and other information be documented.

In conclusion, there isn't anything much here that I'm concerned about except what I have mentioned, about the use of these centres and the fact that some people will have to pay to have these centres available to them. I guess I would have to say that if we can get some answers to those particular questions, I believe I can support this bill.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw, followed by Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to be able to rise and enter the debate on Bill 206 today, the Designation of Child Access Exchange Centres Act. As I look at the preamble of the bill, it says, "Whereas there is a need to encourage parents and guardians to have access to their children in keeping with the best interests of [children]." When I look at that particular statement and we start to look at what is good for children and what it is that they need in their lives in order to help them to grow and become all that they can be and what environment that is that would allow that in the best way, for me the tragedy of this piece, of course, is divorce.

I often think back to the '70s when I think I first recognized that divorce existed. I'll even go back before that. I remember that my grandmothers used to call divorce "d-voorce." It was like the big D word, and it was not a common practice in their day. You know, in spite of the problems that were within families, families often stayed together.

I also remember in the '70s when they started that common thinking that if you were unhappy in your marriage, your children would be happier if you got out of that marriage because if the parent was happy, the child would be happy. I think that in some ways that kind of thinking sort of gave people permission, and you started to see the divorce rate climb and climb rapidly.

4:20

It's been so interesting to watch later studies. I remember reading one in *Reader's Digest* not so long ago where they said that they think that thinking was wrong, that, in fact, children are much happier in a marriage even if it's an unhappy marriage if their parents stay together, that the children actually fare better in those circumstances. In further looking at the study, they said that in divorce boys act out right away and that girls often don't act out

until they try to form permanent relationships of their own later in life and that those kinds of things become very, very destabilizing to them.

First of all, I'd like to say that I wish that there didn't have to be divorce, but I'm pragmatic, and I recognize that there are a lot of children that are involved today in families that experience this condition, so we need to look at those issues.

When I look at whether both parents need to be involved in their children's lives, you know, to me that is a no-brainer. I think we all accept that value and understand it. I consider myself to be an expert only in one thing, and that is being the mother of four sons. I mean, I've been their only mother, so I must be the only expert because I'm the only one that has been there as well as a father in their life. I've always said to my kids that there are two types of love. There's a mother's love, and then there is a father's love. I've always considered a mother's love to be more emotionally supportive, perhaps. I know that when my boys have problems, they tend to come to me before their father sometimes because they know that I'm going to be a little more patient, perhaps, in some aspects of their lives than their dad might be.

When you raise four sons, you quickly realize that there are times you really need a father's force as you're trying to keep them from going over the fence. All of my sons at this point in time are over six feet tall. They're bigger than I am. They're physically stronger than I am. I think they're still afraid of me, sort of. I don't know why when I look at them. But when it comes to their father, they can all describe the look. They call it the look. Now, my husband is not even aware that he has a look, but every one of my sons can tell you what that look is. They can even imitate the look, and they can tell you how terrified they are of the look, not that he's ever had to do anything beyond look at them, but there's just something in a boy that understands that look. I would say to you that a mother brings certain things to a child and a father brings certain things to a child, and they're both all so important. So I would agree with the hon. member who brought forward this bill that access of both parents is critical in a child's development and in the prognosis of their future.

I found it very interesting as I was talking to my son the other day. I was lamenting the fact that I'm a mother of four boys, none of which has chosen to get married and provide the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw with grandchildren. I'm one who thinks that's a great idea, and they, of course, keep reminding me that they have lots of time. I said: well, I just don't understand what it is with your generation; they're marrying so much later. I said: even when they do form a permanent relationship, they often want to test run that relationship for a long time before they actually get married; it's almost like they have a fear. I said: what is the problem with your generation? He said to me: "Mother, don't look at our generation. Look at your generation. In fact, many of my generation are the walking wounded of divorce, and they are afraid. They're very afraid. They lived through those circumstances. They know what those battles were like between their parents, and they don't want to take a chance or a risk." So he, in fact, blamed us, which all kids are very, very good at, turning things back on their parents. But in this instance it did stop me, and I did reflect on that, and I thought maybe he was making a very good point there. So I think that that generation definitely can tell us about what it looks like when moms and dads do not have good access to their children and in fact children become the bargaining chip sometimes in marriages that are breaking down.

Some of the toughest files and moments in my constituency office have been when constituents have brought to my office the fight that they could not solve in their marriage and did not seem to be able to

solve through the courts, so they bring it to my office thinking I'm going to help them find some justice that they haven't found anywhere else. I think the part that has always dismayed me is that it always seems to be about the fight and not about the child, and I always caution and advise them to please look to their children's best interest in these circumstances.

When I look at this bill and the merits of it, at first glance I like it. I like the fact that we're trying to keep the best interests of children, but when I move on to the next paragraph where it says, "Whereas the Province should promote access exchange in a positive environment by designating existing [child care] facilities for this purpose," I think: is this a good practice? I'm not certain, Mr. Speaker, and it's one of the reasons that I wanted to be here for today's debate. I wanted to be able to hear what other members had to say about this. I have some concerns about this. I'd like to hear some answers to this. Is this a good practice?

I'd like to hear whether the Minister of Justice, in fact, thinks this would work well with the court systems, if this could be a good practice. I need to know: would this create or move a flashpoint to a place where other children are present, and do we have some concerns around that? I mean, the last thing that I would like to see is centres becoming the place where parents battle with other children present. There would have to be some special circumstances around these centres that are chosen and some special kind of training that would happen for those staff members that would participate there.

Can we feasibly do this across the province? That would be another question that I would have. I know that we often talk about rural Alberta and how their services are a lot further apart.

So those are three of the questions that I would like to see answered before I could support or not support the bill, but I do fundamentally believe that children always benefit when they have access to both parents in their lives and that it is critically important to them.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think Bill 206, the Designation of Child Access Exchange Centres Act, is trying to grapple with serious problems. I note that the member said – and I think we could all agree – when she introduced it that "there is a need to encourage parents and guardians who are separated or divorced to have access to their children." She goes on to say, "This bill promotes access exchange in a positive environment by designating child-centred facilities in Alberta for this purpose." I believe that we can all agree that it is beneficial for both parents to be involved with their children. I suppose that in an ideal world we wouldn't be in that position, divorced or not, but it happens. So I compliment the member for trying to deal with this.

I'm not going to go through clause by clause at this particular time, but I want to just lay out some concerns that have been said to us by the NDP opposition, and perhaps the member can allude to it later on in the debate. The act proposes to designate existing child care facilities as child access exchange centres, but it does not establish a mandate for such redesignated centres. For example, what services are to be offered there? Are they merely sites of child exchange, or are there to be supervised visits? I'll get in to what I'm talking about. Nor does the act stipulate staffing, security, or funding issues, Mr. Speaker, rather leaving everything to regulation or applying existing child care facility standards. Now, I believe that these are clearly insufficient. We need all the necessary additional

requirements or modifications to be legislated to ensure that they receive proper funding and attention.

The act stipulates that individuals may use the services of the centres either by court order or by agreement, but I think that in that case, we have to define what agreement or services mean. The bill as it is does not establish whether or not these exchange centres would be merely exchange centres or sites of supervised access. As the member is well aware, the needs of each are quite different, and they must be addressed.

I'll point to what I'm driving at. The bill – and maybe the hon. member can talk to it – does not begin to address the reasons why people might use child exchange centres. Domestic abuse is often one of the reasons at least. The figure that we have is that of 76 per cent of women and children who are victims of domestic abuse, more than half of them flee their homes with their children. More than 30 per cent of them have been there before, and a little better than half of them eventually press charges and manage to extricate themselves and their kids from dangerous situations. I know that that's not all the cases, but that happens.

4:30

Now, once they do, many of these women find themselves victims of retaliatory violence and must therefore make use of child exchange centres to ensure their continued safety while obeying court-ordered visitation rights of their former spouse lest they be charged with denying visitation rights. The point I'm making is that these exchanges now take place at Edmonton Police Service or RCMP detachments. The reason, of course, is obvious: security measures to protect both mother and children. The mother is guarded in a back room while the police or RCMP exchange the children with the father at the front of the station.

That's one type of situation we have to look at. I take it – and the member can perhaps enlarge on this after – that that's not the situation that she's looking at because we have to be very careful in that situation. Obviously, supervision is absolutely necessary, I think, in those cases. Perhaps this is what we're driving at, but it's not clear in the bill, and that's why I'm asking that this be clear. Child exchange arrangements are not always, of course, due to violent circumstances. Rather, the realities of divorce or separation result in difficult situations for all involved. A neutral exchange centre is laudable, and I believe that that's sort of what we're looking at.

This is a great idea, but I think we need a little more in the bill, in the legislation itself. For example, I don't know if the minister is aware that the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters has produced an in-depth analysis of this issue, one that recognizes the many complicated facets of the problem, the least of which is that child access exchange centres need a whole new type of staff: part social worker, part remand centre guard, part psychologist, part legal aid, part mediator. I would suggest with all due respect that leaving such staffing requirements to regulation – and we know what's happened in long-term care – often doesn't work. It does not ensure that proper funding is dedicated to the training of such staff, that the staffing levels and competence will be monitored, what training staff will undergo, and what support staff will be on hand.

In other words, we're into a very complicated area, and I think we need to spell this out. The idea, I believe, has merit, but it can't be left to regulation. I think this is too serious a problem. I see that the centres themselves must be multipurpose to accommodate for the various domestic situations leading to their use and also to reflect the needs of children in question, whose ages can range, you know, from infant to teenager. Their security and comfort must be paramount, and simply redesignating child centre facilities, even modified, will

not do so. So what we're suggesting is the training, and some thought has to be put into this.

One I will bring up. I said I wouldn't go into it, and I won't go into all the sections. I would like the member to take a look at section 4(3). This stipulates that use of the centres may be denied if either parent does not wholly comply with requirements for use. Now, obviously, we understand that there must be consequences, you know, if people lie to the centres or whatever, but denying their use would hurt the children more than anyone else. I think then we go against what the bill wants. The whole purpose, I think, of this bill is to do what's right for the children so they have access. I would ask the member to take a look at that particular section and see if it doesn't defeat the purpose for what the bill wants.

I would suggest – and maybe it's necessary in this – that it's a bill that's a good idea, but probably we're asking to do too much in this bill without the detail. We really, before we pass this bill, I think – hopefully the member would agree – need detail regarding safety requirements, staffing requirements, parental agreements, et cetera. The fact that these are all left to regulations modelled by existing centres ignores the reasons these centres are so needed: to make use of child exchange centres to ensure their continued safety.

I guess what we're saying also here: if we're going to use daycare centres, that's a very different role. Again, it comes back to what I was talking about with the training and the rest of it. If it's an exchange and they're doing other things, they can't do that. There's going to have to be the other trained people. You're going to have, perhaps, teenagers around, you know, in a daycare. That's not necessarily bad if there's proper supervision there.

I could go through this, but I don't think it's appropriate at this stage. Those are some of the broader concerns, and they would tie into sort of the preamble that I talked about: the use of daycares, sections 2(1), 2(2), 3, and 4.

I guess what I'm basically saying, Mr. Speaker, is that this is probably a good idea. Something needs to be done. I think we need to flesh it out a lot more because just setting this up, if we don't have, as I said, the proper standards, the proper training, and what the purposes are, how this works with the daycare that we already have – some other members have talked about, you know, the differences between rural Alberta and, say, Edmonton or Calgary. I don't think we can leave it to regulations. It's just too important.

I will certainly commend the member for bringing it forward. I think the idea is good. It's the direction we have to move in, but we'd better think it through and have the proper safeguards there.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, followed by Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise today and join the debate on Bill 206, the Designation of Child Access Exchange Centres Act. I'd also wish to recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow for initiating discussion here today as I feel this is a subject worthy of attention.

I feel that this is an issue of family dynamics. Strong, healthy families are the backbone of this great province. Families give purpose and identity through collective values and beliefs. They form the foundation on which to build solid, vibrant communities, providing a sense of cohesion and co-operation to all our citizens. Having said that, times have regrettably changed. When many marriages once remained intact through good and bad times, nearly half of all marriages within Alberta now result in separation or divorce. This is an issue that has surely had an impact on more Albertans than can be imagined and has altered the once strong

family dynamics for both parents and children. Unfortunately, we can't change what has been done, but we do have an opportunity to help parents and especially children cope. We should do all that we can to ensure that despite these discouraging situations where families become separated, the best interests of the children are considered in an attempt to maintain relatively strong family dynamics.

A strong sense of family is extremely important to children of any age. They must feel safe, comfortable, loved, and at peace. They need to live in an environment that is supportive and stable. In most situations children are very tuned in to what is going on around them, seemingly able to sense positive and negative energy. Mr. Speaker, the breakup of a family can have an undeniable impact on children. Divorce can lead to feelings of confusion or abandonment. It may also alter a child's perception of healthy relationships. Studies have shown that children of a divorced family are more likely to experience academic, behavioural, and social problems further on in life. These feelings may also apply to the parents as they attempt to come to grips with the end of a marriage.

Regardless of the situation opportunities should be provided to help everyone involved, particularly children, adjust to the changes as well as they can. This bill would offer that opportunity. We should be doing all that we can to help all Albertans live healthy and happy lives.

The majority of divorces result in a child living with only one parent and in some cases living in a completely different town or city than the other parent. This makes visitation on the part of the nonresidential parent challenging, to say the least. Mr. Speaker, for example, in some studies it is estimated that in regard to children in Canada living with only their mother, nearly half of these people visited their fathers at least once every two weeks. One-quarter of the children saw their fathers only once a month or less. Some statistics paint an even bleaker picture of the years following a divorce. It's estimated that two or three years after a divorce roughly one-quarter of children in Canada never see their fathers at all. These numbers indicate that a great deal of children in Canada may not be seeing their fathers nearly enough, and Alberta is no exception.

4:40

Additionally, there are sometimes cases when the residential parent will interfere with the visitation process in an attempt to deny their former spouse from accessing the child. A situation like this not only impedes the right of the nonresident parent to see his or her child but ultimately denies the child the right to visit with a parent that they may not see very often. This presents the need for exchange centres where certified individuals are present to document any relevant data pertaining to the exchange. As outlined in Alberta's child care regulations, this could help to ensure that all appropriate access orders are being followed. In the event that they are not being followed, the court would then have the ability to review said documentation and to make an appropriate ruling based on the findings.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 206 will increase fairness in regard to visitation in that it would not allow the custodial parent to unjustly withhold access to the child and through documentation provided to the courts create a safeguard, protecting the rights of both the noncustodial parent and the child. This is the biggest strength of the bill.

Several supervised access and exchange centres do exist in Alberta; however, there seems to be no regulatory consistency in terms of how they each conduct their business. Many other jurisdictions in Canada and outside the country are facing the same challenges as we are in this regard, although some have taken

different approaches to resolve the issue. The province of British Columbia, for example, has approximately 10 locations that provide supervised access and access exchange of children. These facilities are regulated by the supervised access and access exchange program and are responsible for a series of directives, most of which relate to their staff. These regulations are in place to ensure that all staff members are trained and equipped to provide a safe access and exchange environment for all family members under a variety of circumstances.

The use of these centre, however, does have some limitations, Mr. Speaker. Only families who have been referred by a court justice are permitted to use the service. These particular families may only use the service for a three-month period, although extensions may be granted in some cases by the court. Even though the families who use these services may do so for a given period of time, the constraints do oblige the families to explore other independent, long-term solutions for visitation or the transfer of children.

Mr. Speaker, I feel that this aspect of the child access centres in British Columbia should be closely considered. Not only does this province provide a valuable standardized service to those in need, but it also facilitates a process where the family must work together toward creating a long-term solution regarding the issues of exchange on their own. Current programs within Alberta do exist to an extent although it's important to make constant improvements. An advanced system could aid in improving relations between family members to some degree and could also alleviate some pressure that is being placed on the access facilities by promoting the family to become self-sufficient.

Ultimately, Mr. Speaker, this is what the process should be all about. Separated families that are unable to interact cordially for their child's sake should have access to a facility that will open the possibility for impartial exchange while learning how to compromise and to make similar decisions down the road on their own, although I would cite that after reviewing Bill 206, I was struck by the fact that this legislation is being proposed to the Assembly before we have completed the cross-ministry initiative dealing with visitation exchange.

Alberta Children's Services and the Department of Justice and Attorney General are both currently working on the project, which aims to shed light on the realities of this issue and explore the options available to improve the situation within the province. The current cross-ministry initiative led by those outstanding departments is designed to take an environmental scan of safe visitation exchange centres. This pilot project, so to speak, came from a large investigation by the Alberta Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying entitled Finding Solutions Together. The report listed safe exchange as an aspect of visitation that required attention and investigation.

Results of the current initiative are, to my knowledge, not far off, and if we proceed with Bill 206 before that time, it seems to me that we might be putting the cart before the horse and, in doing so, defeating the purpose of completing the initiative altogether. It's important to be patient. However, with this being said, I think that this bill does provide us with a good starting point for discussion. In due time if legislation leading to the designation of child access exchange centres was passed, our province would become the first to do so. This act could demonstrate to all Albertans that the government is committed to helping separated families interact in a way that always keeps the best interests of their children at mind. Therefore, I strongly urge all members to join me in supporting the intent of Bill 206.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, followed by Calgary-Hays.

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to make a few comments on this Bill 206, Designation of Child Access Exchange Centres Act, and thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow for this initiative. I came into this discussion asking the questions: how serious is this and what are the numbers? The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow has indicated the seriousness of the issue, that children do not have access to their parents when there is a broken marriage, and it is a very serious matter. She offered the statistic that 48 per cent of nonresident parents do not have access to their children. That's a very serious statistic.

I don't need to be convinced that there's a need for a safe, secure environment for the exchange of children. Having been involved in marriage counselling throughout my previous career, I think the most difficult thing was just dealing with the tremendous anger and vindictiveness on the part of parents who are going through a divorce, an anger so great that sometimes I felt threatened myself, so I can imagine what young children feel when they are put in difficult situations when their parents are in conflict. So I don't need to be convinced of the need for this kind of thing.

The next question I had was: well, are there other alternatives? Maybe there are other structures that could provide this kind of thing. I know that there has been discussion in the past about a unified family court, and perhaps one of the services that a unified family court could provide would be this kind of service.

Why do we need such legislation if, as the hon. member mentioned, there is a volunteer aspect to this? I suppose that we wouldn't need legislation just to cover the volunteer aspect, but it's the court order aspect that we need to seriously consider. So if the court order is involving custody issues and the transference of the children, then it makes sense that there be a designated exchange place where the parents can take their children.

Okay. I'm convinced that we need the legislation. What kind of legislation? I notice that there are lots of examples throughout the country. It's easy to find examples. Just google through the Internet. There are different kinds. As the previous speaker mentioned, there are different types of centres.

In the state of Maryland, for example, such services are provided through the circuit courts of Maryland in co-operation with Catholic charities of Washington DC, which is interesting because the hon. member did raise the issue of the use of churches. I don't think the bill is specifically focused on daycare centres. I don't know why we get hung up with daycare centres because there are lots of other possibilities for the focus of this kind of facility, and churches would be a good one. I think that in Maryland it's not quite as developed as the hon. member envisions in this bill. I don't see that in Maryland they use trained staff, for example, and there's no cost involved, which is interesting. They don't charge anything. They just provide through churches a comfortable place for children to wait until another parent picks them up.

Now, Ontario is an interesting example. I know that some hon. members don't think that many good things come from Ontario, but Ontario has supervised access centres. In fact, there are 52 of them in Ontario. These supervised access centres provide a safe and secure setting where visits and exchanges can take place under the supervision of trained staff and volunteers. So it's much greater developed in Ontario. It's funded by the Ministry of the Attorney General and delivered through partnerships. So, again, there's that partnership aspect, which I find intriguing. I don't see anything in the bill that indicates that, that there ought to be partnerships between government and, for example, children's mental health

centres or YMCAs or YWCAs or churches or local children's aid societies to provide these kinds of centres.

4:50

In the Ontario example there's a cost, as is recommended by this bill, but it's a limited cost. It's actually a well-defined cost, a one-time yearly fee up to \$300 or a per visit/exchange of no more than \$25, which I think might be important. Also, in Ontario fees are waived for those unable to pay, which I think is also extremely important for families on low income.

As others have mentioned, there's the issue of the training of staff. There's the issue of cost and how this is funded. There's also the issue of what department this would come under. I mean, if this was brought not as a private member's bill but as a government bill, it would probably be more specific about which department it would be under. In the case of Ontario it's the Attorney General, so the equivalent here is the Minister of Justice. I could see Justice bringing that as a government bill so that this would be authorized under Justice. The same with Saskatchewan. That's administered through Justice and their social work units. I think that's important to know exactly what we're doing here in terms of developing this legislation. The bill leaves it quite vague in terms of the minister. The minister would be whatever minister is defined under section 16 of the Government Organization Act. It would be better if it came as a bill from Alberta Justice, and we could move from there.

Anyway, those are my initial comments on this bill. I thank the member for bringing this because this is, indeed, an important issue.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays, followed by Calgary-Foothills.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great pleasure to rise in this Assembly and join the debate on Bill 206, the Designation of Child Access Exchange Centres Act, sponsored by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Mr. Speaker, our children are the future of this province. In order for our province to continue to enjoy the economic prosperity and social stability that we are currently experiencing, it is essential that we do all that we can to ensure that our children are given every advantage possible. In this regard, I'm encouraged to see that this government continues to fund education and children's services so that our programs for youth are the envy of the country and our children are given every opportunity to succeed in the competitive world of tomorrow.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, while we ensure that our children are properly educated and enjoy the best access to social programs, there may be more that the government could do to ensure that the children are taken care of during cases of divorce. Divorce is, at the best of times, an extremely painful and difficult experience for a child. Divorce subjects children to conflict and instability at a time when they require a stable and nurturing environment. These difficulties are often compounded when there is conflict regarding visitation with children or parents are simply denied access to their children.

Our current laws surrounding access and visitation are quite difficult to enforce. While courts do have the power to fine or jail those who willfully violate an access order, the reality is that a lack of adequate documentation often allows one parent to hide behind conflicting testimony and deny the other parent access to the children.

Denial of access is something that occurs far too often in Canada. In 1999 the National Longitudinal Survey of Children & Youth found that in cases where children of divorce were living with their

mother, only 47 per cent of children saw their fathers regularly. This is not fair and it is very harmful. Statistics have shown that trauma caused by divorce or separation has many detrimental, long-term effects on the personal development of a child. Children of divorced parents are far more likely to have behavioural, academic, and other types of social problems. Sadly, these problems often become far more serious later in the child's life, especially when children are denied access to one parent.

One American study which tracked 6,400 boys over 20 years found that those who grew up without the active involvement of a father in their lives were three times as likely to commit a crime. Moreover, the state of Wisconsin reports that in their state children who grew up without the involvement of both parents were 12 times more likely to serve time in jail than those who came from intact, two-parent families. We must ask ourselves why this is happening. The answer to this question is that raising a child is something that requires the time, energy, and love of two parents. We are fooling ourselves if we think the children are as likely to be successful later in life when they are denied contact with one parent.

I support Bill 206 because it puts into place a system that ensures that in case of divorce or separation children continue to have regular contact with both parents. By setting up a system whereby documentation of access exchange is kept by a neutral third party, we are making it easier for our courts to enforce access orders and thus more likely that both parents will continue to play an active role in a child's life after separation. Bill 206 will help protect children at a time when they are most vulnerable.

One of the chief criticisms of Bill 206 has been cost. Some of my colleagues have raised concerns about the costs that would be incurred to set up the system for designating and regulating child access centres. While I believe that cost is an issue that merits careful consideration, I also see an opportunity for us to save money for the taxpayers of this province. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, Bill 206 will help our courts to perform their functions far more efficiently. Currently courts are forced to devote a considerable amount of time and resources to enforcing child access orders and monitoring compliance. A system whereby accurate documentation is kept will allow our courts to easily monitor compliance with a child access order and act swiftly in cases where one parent is denied access.

Secondly, there is a great potential to save money with respect to criminal justice. There is ample evidence, some of which I have previously discussed, that suggests that children are far more likely to commit crime later in life if they do not have the benefit of having both parents play an active role in their lives. As we all know, the social and monetary costs of crime are staggering. Housing an offender in Alberta costs several thousand dollars per month; moreover, there are additional costs such as court costs, administration, and costs to reintegrate an offender into society. This is not to mention the economic costs that crime has on businesses and private citizens as well as the many negative social implications of crime. Mr. Speaker, if by passing Bill 206 we can put into place a system that contributes to the stability of a child's life and make it less likely that a child will commit a crime later in life, then I think that is a worthwhile investment.

Another concern that has been raised is that the province may be legally liable if during a supervised exchange the safety of a child is compromised. This may be a risk, but I believe that Bill 206 actually reduces the risk to children by putting into place a system whereby the Alberta government works with child care providers to ensure that staff are adequately trained to handle child access situations and to minimize conflict. Minimizing the risk to our

children and ensuring their safety and future health must be foremost and trump all concerns about legal liability. Mr. Speaker, to be sure, Bill 206 does have drawbacks and potential risks. Still, I feel that the potential benefits to Alberta's children far outweigh the risks.

Ensuring the future of our children must be a priority for government. Bill 206 will make a positive contribution to this endeavour by reducing the amount of stress that thousands of Alberta children whose parents divorce or separate are subjected to. This will pay dividends in the future by reducing social problems and contributing to the stability and vitality of Alberta. I urge all members of this Assembly to strongly consider making an investment in the future of this province by giving their support to Bill 206.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills, followed by the Minister of Children's Services.

Mr. Webber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise today and participate in Bill 206. I feel that this is a very important issue, and I am very glad that the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow has brought this bill forward so that we may debate it.

Families are the foundation of Alberta, and it has been proven time and time again that it is imperative that children, as they grow up and develop, have both parents involved in their lives and that both parents are active participants in their development. It is to the detriment of a child when either of his or her parents is no longer part of their life. Doing what is best for the children of Alberta is something I am sure that every member of the Legislature would agree with. Protecting and helping our children grow into productive and successful individuals who help make this province an even better one is an ideal that I am confident we are striving towards.

As an Albertan I am concerned with the vast number of couples who have separated or divorced within the province as well as within the country as a whole. Back in 2003 there were approximately 8,000 divorces in Alberta, a very large number, Mr. Speaker. With the breakup of so many Alberta families we must ensure that children have as many opportunities as possible to remain in contact with both parents.

5:00

Mr. Speaker, Bill 206, the Designation of Child Access Exchange Centres Act, proposes one method for facilitating the continued relationship between noncustodial parents and their children. This can be done by designating facilities that are already children-specific, such as daycares and clubs, as areas for the exchange of children between their parents, thus cutting down on the need for the parents to come into contact with one another following a difficult divorce or separation.

One of the great aspects of this bill is that these designated child access exchange centres can be used both on a voluntary basis or by court order. Allowing average Albertans who are struggling emotionally with separation or divorce to use these facilities is a proactive step toward ensuring that both parents are able to actively participate in their child's life regardless of what may be going on between the two parents. Allowing these centres to be used under court order will also provide a useful tool for the courts. Not only will this help them to ensure that children are able to associate with their parents, but the staff of these child exchange centres will then also be available to record the access exchange between the two. This is an important feature of the bill, Mr. Speaker. Having these facilities available for the courts to assign couples to use in exchanging their children will no doubt be a useful resource for the courts to use. In having an independent third party that is able to record any

information the court may request, such as the time a child was dropped off and picked up at the centre, the courts will then have available to them a record of the access exchange.

As well, courts could possibly assign guardians to use such a centre for a period of time if they feel that previous exchanges have been too difficult on the child. Courts could also use these designated child access exchange centres if a couple has appeared before them and the story presented is conflicting. Thus, as has been mentioned, the courts can order the use of such facilities so that documentation of the exchange could be carried out by a neutral third party, and it would be available for the courts to use. Currently judges are always making decisions in this regard on he said/she said circumstances. By having documentation present, the courts will be able to make better decisions. This clearer picture presented to the courts of how well both parties have been doing in terms of following access exchange agreements will serve to be extremely beneficial.

Mr. Speaker, whether these facilities are used voluntarily or by court order, they are a good resource for Albertans to ensure that those involved in a child's life remain in a child's life whether their parents separate or divorce. I believe that as the government any time we can reasonably encourage parents to take an active role in their children's lives, we should do so. The development of youth is influenced primarily by their parents; thus, they should both have the opportunity to participate in their child's life. In fact, our Family Law Act recognizes parents as the greatest influence in children's lives. If we can promote the access of parents to their children, I believe we should do so. The designation of these centres would provide such an opportunity. If these sites were also used voluntarily by some families following separation, it may reduce the amount of stress that children experience when their parents are no longer together. I'm sure that we have all seen the effects that divorce has on children. It can affect their ability to sleep, their performance in school, and their overall happiness. These designated centres for access exchange have the potential to reduce the level of stress that children face in such situations by increasing the likelihood that they will be able to remain in contact with both parents.

The designation of child access exchange centres for the purpose of voluntary or court-ordered exchange of children in a child-centred, neutral, and impartial facility with the ability to document the exchange is a good resource for any couple going through separation and for the courts, as has been mentioned. These centres will also be a good resource for separated parents to use in that the facilities designated by the minister will no doubt be places that are already used for the care of children or as a space for their recreation. Thus, children will not be exposed to a confrontational, negative environment such as a police station while access exchange between parents is occurring.

Mr. Speaker, I focus primarily on parents accessing their children as it is parents who have the greatest influence on a child's development and their life in general. However, I would also like to point out that the bill does not exclude others who have a valid interest in the child's life. Therefore, it does include guardians as well as other individuals, for example grandparents. This is an important feature since these individuals can often be left behind in a situation of separation or in the event that other people in the child's life are not getting along. This allows access to occur between a child and those people who are important in their lives.

Mr. Speaker, a week ago the members of the Legislature passed my motion, Motion 505, recognizing the positive and critical role that grandparents play in the lives of their grandchildren and encouraging access when it is in the best interests of the child.

Grandparents are definitely an important part of many children's lives. This bill would help to ensure that grandparents have access to their grandchildren even when there is a conflict or disagreement with the children's parents.

Again, in keeping with what is in the best interests of the child, Bill 206 can help ensure that those with a legitimate interest in a child's life are able to remain a part of the child's life. Because these centres could be such a useful resource as a place for separated parents to go voluntarily, for the courts to order couples to go, for the documentation of access exchange, and for potentially facilitating access for grandparents with their grandchildren, I stand to give my support to the Designation of Child Access Exchange Centres Act today.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services, followed by the Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to speak to Bill 206, the Designation of Child Access Exchange Centres Act. First, I would like to commend the hon. member for bringing forward the bill, that her heart is in the right place on the well-being of children. I think all members of the Assembly would agree that protecting children who are innocently caught in the middle of a parental dispute is of the utmost importance. Sadly, too many Alberta families have experienced violence resulting from conflict between parents. Too many children have paid the ultimate price for violence between family members. Providing children with a safe place to visit family is an admirable goal.

Our communities also recognize that it's an important issue. When my ministry had the province-wide Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying in 2004, safe visitation and exchange was identified as an area to explore further. I'm pleased to say that we're working to develop an Alberta solution to the issues in the best interests of the children. Safe visitation is in our current cross-ministry business plan. Together with the Minister of Justice, Children's Services staff have been working to understand the issue and the services that are now available. We've completed an environmental scan of programs across Canada and the United States, and we'll use the information to determine the next step for a safe visitation and exchange model that best meets the needs of Albertans.

Although this work is well under way, there are still many avenues to explore as we work towards building services that meet those needs. For example, we have to determine the value and the principles that will guide safe visitation and exchange programs in Alberta. We must look at ways of training staff in already existing agencies to build on the quality of service they provide. We must also develop a sustainable plan to expand availability and access to safe visitations. Our key consideration is keeping the focus on the best interests and safety of children.

This bill, Mr. Speaker, appears premature given that there is still limited understanding of the services that currently exist, the diversity between existing programs, and a lack of knowledge by those programs regarding best practices related to the safety of the children involved. We also need to further examine the various needs of rural and urban communities. One single approach cannot work in circumstances that vary widely from family to family.

It is important to note that Alberta has several projects already working to provide children with safe access to family members. For example, Mr. Speaker, the YWCA Sheriff King Home safe visitation program in Calgary works with parents to provide a safe place to have court-ordered supervised visits or monitor exchanges.

Also, our regional child and family services authorities fund many agencies that provide supervised visits between children and families. The clients served through these agencies are not specific to custody and access disputes. The focus of supervised visits is to maintain a child's safety in a wide range of circumstances. These local projects give us a good example to follow but need to be considered in the larger context of helping families across the province.

5:10

I would also like to mention that we are in the process of reviewing the Social Care Facilities Licensing Act and the regulations that apply to facilities providing care to children. The outcome of this important review could also have an impact, especially if it is to apply to the proposed safe visitation centres.

Children's Services, Mr. Speaker, is certainly supportive of initiatives to ensure the safety of children and families and to promote appropriate parental contact. Before proceeding, it is fundamental that information about current practice be thoroughly reviewed. Doing so will ensure that we have the best and most current information from which to move forward and make decisions for children. I would also suggest that it would be wise to ensure that any proposed legislation addressing safe visitation and access takes into account the findings and expertise gained through the cross-government ministry. This will ensure a co-ordinated, sustainable approach to addressing the issue of safe visitation and access.

At the end of the day we need to realize that this is not about adults; it's about children. I am very supportive of anything we can do to keep children out of harm's way while maintaining important connections to their family. However, Mr. Speaker, the issue is complex. The work we're doing now to more fully understand the issue and put together the best possible service for Alberta's children must happen first. Only once we've got a better grasp can we move forward with effective, accessible, and sustainable help for children who need a safe place to visit family members.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Stevens: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 206 in second reading. I'd like to start by congratulating the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow for allowing us the opportunity to discuss this important issue.

Bill 206 highlights an important justice issue facing many separated families. It is a sad truth that many children do not continue to have a close relationship with both parents after separation. Children benefit from knowing that they are loved and wanted, and we need to keep working to reduce the impact of family breakdown. Fortunately, many parents in Alberta manage to put their children first and to work together to keep the children's relationship with both parents intact.

Before I speak to the specifics of this bill, I'd like to clarify a question of terminology that arises from the difference in federal and provincial legislation. The federal Divorce Act refers to a parent's time with a child as "access" while Alberta's Family Law Act calls this "parenting time." Each of these terms is correct, and though access is the term more commonly known, parenting time is what this time is intended to be. This time together is very important for both the child's well-being and for the parent.

Mr. Speaker, I'm sure that every member in this House has received calls from constituents who are not able to see their children. I can tell you that this government has been investigating

the options for helping families find solutions. I appreciate that the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow has raised the question of exchange centres for children.

Mr. Speaker, there are many reasons that children are not able to spend time with both parents. This makes the issue very complex. In some cases the problem is simply logistics. One parent may move away from the children to find work or family support after a relationship breaks down. In these cases it becomes extremely difficult for parents to see their children and remain a meaningful part of their lives. In other cases the problem is that one parent deliberately makes it difficult for the other parent to continue a meaningful relationship with their children. Unfortunately, some parents do use their children as a means to get back at their former partners. For some it may be an issue of control instead of what would be the best for the children. A study appearing in the *Family Relations* journal indicates that as many as 25 to 35 per cent of parents admit having interfered with the other parent's time with a child.

Mr. Speaker, there are other serious reasons parents give to explain why they deny the other parent time with their child. For example, we've all heard terrible stories of parents showing up to visit their children when they've been drinking or using drugs. Also, some parents might not yet have the skills or experience they need to keep their children safe and well cared for during visits. Some may have a history of violence. At other times the problem is that one parent simply does not make the effort to see their children. There could be many reasons for this also.

Some parents do not ask the court for court-ordered time with their child. Others fail to show up at the scheduled time. Other reasons include emotional concerns, a lack of a proper home to bring the children to, or frustration at dealing with the other parent. Failure to exercise access and access denial are very complex issues, yet I think we would all agree that we want children in Alberta to be able to have a healthy and continuing relationship with both parents in most cases.

Mr. Speaker, I'm proud that some of the initiatives offered by Alberta Justice through family justice services have helped a great number of Alberta children maintain a good relationship with both parents. While parenting disputes arise – and in many cases they inevitably do – this ministry has ensured support to resolve conflicts. Over the years we have offered increasing levels of service to help families get through separation or divorce and to protect their children during the process. These services are in addition to the many supports offered by other ministries, such as Children's Services and Human Resources and Employment.

We also help parents of young children going through separation or divorce through the focus on communication and separation course. This specialized course is offered at no charge and helps parents learn how to better communicate even though they may be in conflict.

Mediation services have been another key component of our services for many years. Every year about 2,000 families use our mediators to work out their custody and access disputes, and over 75 per cent of these parents reach an agreement that works for them. For most parents this service is also available free of charge.

This past October the Family Law Act came into effect. This act continues the effective access enforcement provisions formerly contained in the Domestic Relations Act. Through those provisions people being denied court-ordered time with a child can seek relief from either the provincial court or the Court of Queen's Bench. The act also helps those parents whose children are not returned to them or who incur additional expenses because the other parent does not

appear for scheduled time with the child. To make that legislation effective for parents, family justice services offers assistance to parties in bringing forward their court applications, and new initiatives are being considered as we seek to improve service.

I appreciate that the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow has raised the question of exchange for children. It's an important concern for this government. I would like to note that as a result of the Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying, work on the cross-ministry safe visitation and exchange initiative has been started. The goal of that initiative is to improve the quality and consistency of safe visitation and access to programs across the province. Key staff from both Justice and Children's Services are working on this project as we speak. The hon. member's work has helped put focus on this very important issue facing many Alberta families, that of facilitating access to their children, but I would prefer to allow the cross-ministry group to complete its work before considering passing any legislation in this area.

There have been a number of questions posed by members who have spoken to this bill this afternoon. They need to be addressed. I would respectfully submit that there needs to be appropriate consultation with people who are involved in this area, the stakeholders, because they will be able to offer insight.

To give you an example, Mr. Speaker, in the Department of Justice we have initiatives such as domestic violence courts. There is a new initiative called ARTAMI, which is the Alberta relationship

threat assessment management initiative. These matters did not occur overnight. There was a great deal of consultation and a great deal of work that went into these particular matters before they ever saw the light of day. They have started as pilot projects, and it has been an issue obtaining resources in order to expand these projects once they get going, not only in the location where they happened to start but also to other parts of Alberta.

While this is a very good idea, Mr. Speaker – that is, to improve access to children – it is also an idea that requires a great deal more work and answers to many of the questions that have been posed here this afternoon. So I would encourage that this matter not proceed at this time, but I do congratulate the hon. member for bringing it forward.

At this time, Mr. Speaker, I would move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In view of the hour I would move that we now call it 5:30 and reconvene this evening at 8.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:20 p.m.]