

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: Tuesday, May 2, 2006

1:30 p.m.

Date: 06/05/02

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Grant us daily awareness of the precious gift of life which has been given to us. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we dedicate our lives anew to the service of our province and of our country. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

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

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last Friday I had the pleasure of attending an art show of donated art from Mexico, and the proceeds were sent back to Mexico for the children. I took the opportunity of inviting the Minister of Culture of Colima, so it is my honour today to stand and introduce to you and through you to all members of the House the hon. Minister of Culture of Colima, Mexico, Ana Cecilia García Luna. She is accompanied by Rebeca Gonzalez, Leonor Sanchez, Fernando Rodriguez, Fernando Rodriguez Jr., and Cristina Amaro. If we could all give them our traditional welcome.

head:

Introduction of Guests

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Legislature two guests that are in the members' gallery, Margaret and Britney Millar. Margaret is a business owner in Kingston, Ontario, but most importantly, I think, she's here to meet the McClellan clan as Britney Millar is my son's fiancée. Britney plays for the Chimos women's hockey team here. I hate to admit this, but they lost to the Calgary Extreme in playoffs. I'd ask both of our guests to rise and receive the very warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great privilege for me to rise today and introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly Mr. Fred Atiq and Mr. Charles Hare of Fiberex Glass Corporation. Mr. Atiq is the founder of Fiberex and an award-winning industrial engineer. Mr. Hare is Fiberex's customer service manager and helped Fiberex win a supplier of the year award in 2002. Fiberex is one of the largest independent glass fibre manufacturers in North America. They operate a state-of-the-art facility in Leduc. Fred and Charles are here today because they are very concerned about dozens of power failures that have disrupted their operations in the last few years. They're hoping that they can get some quick action on that. So I would ask Fred and Charles to please stand and receive the warm welcome of all MLAs.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed a pleasure again to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of our Assembly a fine group of some 60 students from Edmonton-

Castle Downs, namely from St. Lucy Catholic elementary school. They are accompanied by Mrs. Cole Macedo, also Ms Isabelle Dennis, Mr. Daniel Forestier, and Natalie Mercy. All of them were guided through this Legislature by my junior high school teacher, Mr. Charles Grelli. I would ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour again to introduce a group of people from the Countryside Christian school, which is located near Edberg. There are 19 people here from this school. They are led by their teacher, Mr. Justin Thiessen, and parent helpers Darcy and Maxine Goossen and Reg and Connie Siemens. They're seated in the public gallery, and I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, it's my honour and privilege to introduce to you and through you to members of this House 43 happy and excited students from St. Patrick's community school in Red Deer. This group of smart and enthusiastic students are among the most culturally diverse classes in Red Deer, with students born in Colombia, the Philippines, China, and St. John's, Newfoundland. We can celebrate a very bright and colourful future in Alberta. They are accompanied by their principal and teachers Mrs. Kathleen Finnigan, Mrs. Irene Pickle, Mr. Jon Burkinshaw, and Karen Peden. They're in the members' and I think the visitors' gallery as well. I would ask them all to rise to receive the warm welcome of the House.

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

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you to the members of this House two people from my constituency of Cypress-Medicine Hat. Eric Musekamp and Darlene Dunlop live in Bow Island. Eric is the head of the Farmworkers Union of Alberta. I think they're seated in the public gallery. I'd like to ask Eric and Darlene to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and privilege to introduce to you and through you to the Legislative Assembly the newest member of my staff. Mr. Malcolm Lavoie is a third-year honours economics degree student at UBC. He spent two years on the national swim team and, indeed, swam in the world championships last year. He is also fluently bilingual in French and English. I would ask Malcolm to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

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

Reliability of Electricity Supply

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The deregulation of electricity in this province has threatened the financial viability of untold numbers of businesses, including a number in the Leduc-Nisku industrial area. Ongoing power interruptions have cost companies

such as Fibrex Glass Corporation millions of dollars. This government's failure to enforce reasonable standards on the deregulated electricity industry could force successful Alberta businesses to other provinces. My questions are to the Premier. Is it the position of this government to have electricity consumers, who have already lost \$9 million due to the deregulation policy, then pay millions more for transmission and distribution system upgrades just so they can have reliable electricity?

Mr. Klein: Is it the policy? No, I don't think it's the policy. I don't know about the Department of Energy, Mr. Speaker. The minister is away, and I will take that question under advisement. Oh, I understand the minister of agriculture can respond.

Mr. Speaker, just before I turn it over to him, I've had the opportunity of visiting this plant. That's when they were using gas, and of course the price of gas is so expensive. I've seen the news release that the Liberals put out on this particular situation. Apparently the report they refer to does not say who should cover the additional cost for power upgrades. As I pointed out, the Energy minister is away at the Western Energy Alliance meeting, so I'll have the hon. minister of agriculture respond as best as he can.

The Speaker: We'll move on to the next one. Perhaps there'll be time.

The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that this particular issue has gone on for years and the solution is well known, will this government commit now to take urgent action to address electricity problems in the Leduc-Nisku industrial area?

1:40

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, before I turn it over to the hon. minister, the news release says:

"This government must show some leadership and support a real solution to this power supply problem," said Taft. "In the wealthiest province in Canada, why are some businesses experiencing Third World power problems?"

But he doesn't offer a solution.

I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, acting in the capacity of Minister of Economic Development while he's away, it is my understanding – and the Premier actually is very correct when he talks about the fact that the issue is well known. Fibrex has been in discussions with Economic Development in the recent past. This is a request for something that is above what is standard in the industry in that area. We recognize that there's a new substation that needs to be built in that area. In fact, the EUB has approved that, and it will be moving forward.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're just looking for action here.

Given that Fibrex is actually now considering relocating to Manitoba, jeopardizing the jobs of 170 Albertans, will the Premier agree to meet with the Fibrex CEO and other members of the Leduc industrial business community immediately in order to decide upon a solution?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the hon. minister indicated that a new substation is going to be built. I've already met with the individual

involved, but I'm always interested in touring his plant. I found it a very interesting exercise. The last time I toured, he was complaining about the price of gas. He's converted now to electricity, and we're trying to resolve that problem.

The Speaker: The second Official Opposition question will come from the Leader of the Official Opposition, but just a reminder before we move on. First of all, we do not make mention of the absence of hon. members in the House on a given occasion, and secondly, we do not use the names of members in the House either.

Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Resource Revenues

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, this tired Tory government can't stick to a budget, has watched the heritage fund lose 50 per cent of its value, and has no long-term plan for our economy after this latest oil boom. High commodity prices continue to make up for poor fiscal management by this Conservative government. Now the Aon report based on Alberta Finance projections shows that Alberta is on a fiscal downward spiral. My questions are to the Minister of Finance. Will this minister follow the Alberta Liberal lead and save greater portions of the unbudgeted natural resource revenues so that Alberta's economic advantage becomes genuinely sustainable?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can say a definite no to accepting the Liberal policy. Had we done that, there would be needed health facilities that would not be under construction, there would be twinning of an important road to Fort McMurray that wouldn't be under construction, and many other things.

However, I do take exception to his comments about the heritage fund losing its value. There's no question, Mr. Speaker, that there is a change in the value of the heritage fund because a number of assets were removed from it. But today the heritage fund, in fact, has an additional \$2 billion value, and it is a true and a real value, and it's projected to have a value of \$14.6 billion at the end of this fiscal year. To commit a definitive amount, a percentage of revenues, to that when this province is experiencing 4.5 per cent growth – the anticipated could be over 5 per cent – and much-needed capital to support that growth I think would be irresponsible.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the government's own numbers predict that Alberta's prosperity may not last, will this minister reject additional shortsighted prosperity bonuses and chose sound fiscal management over personal political legacies?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, first of all, Mr. Speaker, let me correct . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: The Deputy Premier has the floor.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, let me correct one thing right off. This is the second day in a row we've heard that the Aon report uses Alberta Finance's numbers. In fact, if you read the report, if you understood the report, you would understand that they are using an assumption of a reduction of 3 per cent per year in resource revenue. It's their assumption, not Finance's assumption. Now, we do in a very prudent way show oil and gas royalty revenues at what we believe is a very appropriate, conservative estimate. However, Aon's numbers in that report are not Finance's numbers. They are

an assumption. If they understood economists, they would know that economists use a base of assumptions to lay out a long-term strategy.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: is it this minister's or is it this government's position that in the long term Alberta's resource revenues are going to diminish 3 per cent every year? Is it a valid assumption?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have analysts from the oil and gas industry, from the private sector that we use to base our assumptions on every year, and every year we're criticized by the opposition because we're low on our assumptions. So I say again: what we do is base our assumptions in a very conservative way to ensure that we can maintain the important programs that we have for health, education, seniors, children. You can't get an analysis of oil and gas beyond one year, let alone two or three. We know there's volatility, and that's why we have a number of protections in this province such as the sustainability fund to guard against that volatility.

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

Sale of Surplus Land in Fort McMurray

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In last year's special report by the Auditor General on the sale of surplus government land in Fort McMurray the following was noted: some land sales were not publicly tendered, no analysis of appraisal, no independent review and challenge of sales. Yesterday the minister of infrastructure could not provide accurate, detailed information on the latest surplus land sale of 157 acres that occurred last summer in Fort McMurray. My first question is to the minister. What was the appraisal value of that 157 acre parcel of land?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, yesterday the member asked questions about the sale of some land in Fort McMurray, and I said at the time that we would investigate because I, of course, did not have the information right at hand. I did point out to them that it could be possible that there was a misprint in the *Gazette*, that in fact the decimal was in the wrong place. That turns out to be true, and I will be filing papers to show that. The hon. member said that it had been in the *Gazette* since July 15. That is untrue. The fact is that it was changed back on February 28 of '06 to the correct number. There was another mistake in it that the member did not notice as far as the property was concerned, and that was in the numbering of the lot.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. For the record, Mr. Speaker, the *Gazette* that's in the library indicates that that land was sold for \$2,800.

Now, my second question: given that over the last six years the government sold surplus land in Fort McMurray for over \$36,000 per acre, why was this land sold for less than half that? Why was it not sold for the market price?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, there's land being sold in the city of Fort McMurray. There's land being sold outside of Fort McMurray. To compare apples and oranges and stand up in this House and pretend

that they're the same is ludicrous. They're not the same. As I pointed out earlier, the *Gazette* was changed. It was corrected on February 28. To say that that \$2,800 number was accurate, no, it wasn't accurate. I've got proof here that it was changed. The correct number is on the title of the land: \$2.8 million, Mr. Speaker, not \$2,800.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're not talking about apples and oranges here. We're talking about the difference between incompetent and inept.

Now, my next question: why did the government not wait until the Auditor General finished his report into surplus land sales in Fort McMurray before proceeding with this land sale?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, the process used on land sales is that, first of all, it's determined whether a department within government needs the land or not. If the answer to that is no, then the land will be appraised, and it will be offered to the municipality at the appraised value. If the municipality is not interested in it, then in fact it will be advertised and put on sale. As a matter of fact, many times we end up getting more for it in the sale than it's appraised at.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

School Board Finances

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. School boards across the province are facing a financial squeeze. Edmonton public is the latest school board to be looking at a deficit. In their proposed planning base document presented to the April 18 board meeting, they have projected a \$7 million deficit in this year's budget. My question is to the Minister of Finance. At a time of multibillion dollar surpluses why are school boards facing a financial squeeze so severe that they are forced to run deficits?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, I wish I had the answer to that. We have school boards that are elected to carry out the business of providing an education program for our students. We're charged here with ensuring that they have financial opportunity to do that. Education received over a 5 per cent increase in this year's budget, and I think the Minister of Education expects that that should suffice to operate those schools. However, I can say that the Minister of Education is working with all of the school boards, has met numerous times with them, prebudget and postbudget, to look at all of their concerns whether it be capital or operating. I would say that some of the areas of concern for school boards have been on the operating side with costs in energy. The minister has very rightly brought that forward, and we have responded in the past year to help them with that. So I would expect that Edmonton public will be meeting with the Minister of Education to deal with this issue.

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, the minister said that it's a responsibility given to this government to present enough money to do the job. The point, to come back, is: why are our school boards facing budget deficits that will inevitably lead to cutbacks of teachers and deterioration of learning conditions when the kids return next fall?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, as I said, school boards are elected. They're duly elected by the public to operate schools.

The minister has provided over 5 per cent in operating alone in this year's budget to school boards. Now, if the Edmonton public board is experiencing a problem, they can meet with the Minister of Education and explain why they in particular are facing this problem.

I don't understand it. We pay on a per-pupil basis. We have programs that deal with special needs, ESL: a number of things, Mr. Speaker. So I can't speak for one board as to why they find it difficult to operate within the budget they're given. There are sixty-some-odd boards in this province.

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, this is something coming from this Minister of Finance, who had \$3.2 billion in supplementary estimates, and we're going to lecture the boards on how to do it.

My question is to the Finance minister, Mr. Speaker. Doesn't the Finance minister see the irony of this government being able to afford to give away \$370 million in lost revenues to a corporate sector that's doing really well at the same time that school boards are facing such a financial squeeze that they could be laying off teachers this fall? Doesn't she see the irony of that?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, I see the irony in the hon. member not being able to understand the correction I made in his numbers on the corporate tax reduction that was in this year's budget. I pointed the page out to the hon. member, and I invite him to attend the estimates – I think it's a week tomorrow – to further discuss this. The preamble to that question included comments on a supplementary requisition, of which a fair number of those dollars went to education. My point is that you don't like supplementary estimates, but you want more money for all of these things.

Mr. Speaker, I repeat: there is over a 5 per cent increase to education in this year's budget. I know that the Minister of Education has had repeated meetings with these boards. He has met with every board when they wanted to meet with him. If Edmonton public is experiencing difficulty, I know that the Minister of Education will be sitting down with them forthwith.

Alberta/B.C. Trade Agreement

Mr. Shariff: Mr. Speaker, Alberta and British Columbia held their annual joint cabinet meetings last Friday and signed a landmark trade agreement that is being described as setting the standard for free trade within Canada because of how far it goes to remove trade barriers. When we think of trade barriers, we think of tariffs and import quotas and things like softwood lumber issues. We know that we don't have those kinds of barriers between our provinces. My first question is to the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations. What kinds of barriers does the new Alberta/B.C. trade agreement remove, and what does that do for our economy?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, what this free trade agreement between our two provinces will create is a marketplace for 7.5 million people. It'll be the second largest economic region in Canada. What it does is remove barriers to things like trade, investment, transportation, energy procurement practices as four examples. For example, if a tour bus operator is working out of Golden, British Columbia, for temporary movement of their buses into Lake Louise, they won't need different permits. They'll be able to come in without a great deal of additional restriction. Skilled workers will be able to move back and forth between two provinces. If you're registered as a business in one province, you can do business in the other province. These are all examples where there will be a great deal of economic activity generated among and between these two provinces. Another

example would be in the area of government procurement. Suppliers from either side of the border can meet the procurement needs of governments. Engineers and architects will be able to practise in both provinces.

We're very, very excited about this, Mr. Speaker. While there are not the same kind of barriers that exist among and between countries, there are barriers that exist interprovincially. We think that the rest of Canada should follow Alberta's and British Columbia's lead on this.

Mr. Shariff: Mr. Speaker, my supplementary is also to the same minister. Given Alberta's already tight labour market and the fact that we will have a shortage of about a hundred thousand workers over the next 10 years, how will the free movement of Alberta workers to B.C. help our industries and businesses?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, this agreement is not intended to drain workers from Alberta but, in fact, create opportunities for them and also help to attract workers to come to this province. Once workers know that they're certified in one of the economies, that they can move freely to where the other jobs are, where there's a great deal of economic activity as there is in Alberta right now, we expect that people will be moving in. As we move forward on reconciling the occupational standards, skilled workers from British Columbia technical schools and universities certified by B.C. standards will be able to work here in Alberta. So it can work both ways, but we think on balance it's going to work very much to the advantage of both provinces.

2:00

Mr. Shariff: My final supplementary is also to the same minister. Would this agreement apply to every profession, including professions such as medicine, engineering, or other professions?

Mr. Mar: There is an agreement on internal trade in Canada, Mr. Speaker, that says that you are part of the agreement if you're specifically listed in the agreement. The agreement on internal trade that exists among and between provinces in Canada is very weak. It's not very specific. There's no real dispute resolution mechanism that is of particular advantage. However, in our agreement with British Columbia, instead of saying that you must be in the agreement, we assume that everything is included in the agreement unless you're specifically enumerated as an exception.

So there are some exceptions, Mr. Speaker, with respect to water and environmental protection that will remain within the purview of each individual province. Health and social services, social and aboriginal policies, labour standards, consumer protection, taxation of royalties, public safety: these are all things that will be exempted from this agreement. So those will continue to be within the purview of each individual province, sir.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore, followed by the hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace.

Integrated Land-use Management Strategy

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Forest Products Association released its survey of Albertans' values of their public lands. The survey clearly describes the failure of this government to meet Albertans' expectations and that Albertans expect their government to play an active role in forest management. My questions are to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Why has this government consistently failed to implement any land-use strategy, considering that more than 80 per cent of Albertans support an integrated land-use management?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Coutts: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Forest Products Association did do a survey of Albertans, and they did come up with Albertans' values in relation to the forests and public lands. Albertans were wanting to make sure that tree planting and replanting and reforestation was their number one priority. Protection of the wildlife and habitat in which wildlife live was another priority. Harvesting practices and the management of ecological impacts were definitely on their minds as well as regulations and restrictions on industrial land use. We're not surprised at those values because the Department of Sustainable Resource Development and this government share those same values and want the same things to happen on the land. Our policies have been put in place over this past number of years to make sure that those values are kept for Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll go with my first question again because the minister did not answer it. The government has failed consistently to implement a land-use strategy. How long can we expect one?

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, I did mention that we identified the issues. They're consistent with the issues that this government deals with on a day-to-day basis. We do have management practices in place to make sure that we use best practices. We plant more trees than we cut every single, solitary year. That's consistent with Albertans' values. We do management plans to protect the wildlife and protect critical habitat in forested areas. Our forestry management practices are among the best in Canada, if not North America.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that reforestation is a fundamental expectation of all Albertans, when will the minister require that oil and gas operators reforest disturbed lands that they already harvest?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, we have very strict rules in place to manage the impacts that industry has and the activities that they have on the land. We have many strict requirements for companies to use best practices and to try and reduce the footprint by ILM practices. Industry through the chamber resources and through their own associations, both oil and gas and forestry, is looking at integrated land management. They're wanting to reduce that footprint. It saves them money, it saves the environment, and it is consistent with the values that Albertans have put in front of the AFPA.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Agricultural Trade

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development was in Geneva last week attending WTO agricultural negotiations. Agriculture is an industry that has a large reliance on trade, so these negotiations could have a major impact on our province. It is my understanding that very little progress was made at these meetings. Could the minister please explain what this means for Alberta's producers and processors?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's a very good question. The WTO, or the World Trade Organization, talks are extremely important to Alberta's producers. We're probably 80-plus per cent trade dependent in terms of our agricultural industry, so a positive and aggressive outcome at the WTO is critically important to us. It is unfortunate that they missed their April 30 deadline, which was set last year in Hong Kong. But from my meetings with those individuals I would say that the negotiations are far from dead. There's no formal ministerial meeting in Geneva at the end of April, but they have committed to the next six weeks of very intensive negotiations. They are going to be going very hard trying to overcome some of the impasses that were there. Really, a clear political commitment is needed from all of the countries, including Canada, to ensure that we do get an ambitious and timely conclusion to those negotiations. I'm still hopeful that we can get there.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the same minister. With the federal government being responsible for negotiations, what role did you as a minister play at these meetings?

Mr. Horner: Well, that is correct, Mr. Speaker. It is an international agreement that the federal government is responsible for. Agriculture is the key to our getting an agreement. The federal minister has committed to being consultative with us on whether or not and how he's going to proceed on that, and I'm very confident about that. It was also important for us to make sure that we had some idea where these negotiations were going because we have to make those plans, we have to make those policies, and we have to work with our ag food industry. There's a lot at stake here. We had meetings with Canada's chief negotiators, and we pressed Alberta's trade interests in those negotiations. We also were able to give to him our priorities as to where we thought this would be the best outcome.

We also had the opportunity, Mr. Speaker, to meet with more than 12 of the ambassadors and senior trade negotiators in Geneva in the day and a half, two days that we had to express to them what Alberta's position was and why it was so important to a province like Alberta. We also had many members of Alberta's ag industry with us in Geneva.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is also for the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Given that a finalized deal could present challenges to some segments of the agricultural industry, what is being done to prepare industry once a deal is complete?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, a deal is not going to happen overnight, and anything that is decided is not going to be implemented overnight. Certainly, there are some decisions that have already been made; for example, the removal of all export subsidies by the year 2013 as well as work on domestic support. So there are things that are going to happen over a period of time, and as I said before, we want to get a better understanding of where these negotiations are going to land and what effect that may have on some segments of our industry in a negative fashion so that we can prepare them, so that we can work with them. Indeed, we've opened those discussions with them and have been talking to those industries over the last year. We've had two round-tables on the WTO

negotiations and the possible outcomes, and we're moving in that direction.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Tuition Fee Policy

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Three questions to the Minister of Advanced Education on the report prepared by the Transforming the Advanced Learning System Subcommittee of the A Learning Alberta review. Is the minister satisfied that the recommendation to merely roll back tuition to 2004-2005 levels, when they were at the time some of the highest fees in the nation, really fulfills the Premier's promise of the most affordable, entrepreneurial, and innovative tuition policy in Canada?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Herard: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm glad to tell the hon. member that I'm now on the NDS' leaked distribution list, and I see that maybe he is too. With respect to the recommendations what I can tell the hon. member is that we are beginning tomorrow morning to meet about many things. Stay tuned.

Mr. Taylor: All right, Mr. Speaker. If that's the case, then, is it the minister's position that tuition will be manageable for every Alberta student and that fees will never again become too high?

2:10

Mr. Herard: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that one has to look at the tremendous value that postsecondary education is to the future of all Albertans. I think one has to look at a balance: a balance between parents, who ought to be partnering with their own students; business – you know, the word business doesn't seem to come up that often with respect to support for postsecondary students – the students themselves; and, of course, government. What we're going to do, hon. member, is strike a balance that I think you're going to be happy with.

Mr. Taylor: Well, the minister has promised legislation this spring, Mr. Speaker. Will he commit to keeping the legislated tuition controls in the act, or is this something else he plans to move into regulation and beyond the scrutiny of the public, the Assembly, and the students of Alberta?

Mr. Herard: Mr. Speaker, I know that the legislation is progressing through the process. I know that tomorrow I'm being asked to go to Leg. Review on it. Stay tuned.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Coal-bed Methane Drilling

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've been hearing a great deal about the potential of coal-bed methane development as an economic opportunity, but my constituents, like most rural Albertans, expect their well water supply to be safeguarded from contamination and depletion. That was reinforced in a meeting that I had last week with several of my constituents over this issue. My question is to the Minister of Environment. Given that 90 per cent of the rural water supply comes from groundwater, can the minister explain what he is doing to make sure that my constituents' water is protected while Alberta develops coal-bed methane?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, all Albertans should expect an essential, basic principle of safe drinking water, and that is happening, I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, and all Albertans. I think it's important that as part of our Water for Life strategy about 30 days ago we announced a new water standard when it came to coal-bed methane: effective May 1 testing is required by all industry and companies that are doing any potential drilling. Before they are issued a licence, they have to do the proper baseline testing. Three areas that we look at are, one, the water quality; two, the pressure of the water that is in existence before any drilling takes place; and of course then the issue of the presence of any methane that may be in the existing reservoir.

As we move forward, Mr. Speaker, I can assure the hon. member and all Albertans that we'll continue with the geological mapping and inventories of our ecosystems and watersheds. That is all part of our Water for Life strategy.

Mr. Johnson: My second question to the same minister: how can my constituents trust industry's test results? Who will make sure that the tests are performed correctly?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, I can assure the hon. member and all Albertans that this is a very open and transparent process regarding the testing that is done, that is obligated to be reported back to the actual residents that perhaps could be impacted or that have complained regarding the coal-bed methane drilling. Also, Alberta Environment as part of our ministry's responsibility is working very closely with the lab, the accredited agencies that are doing this water testing to ensure that safe drinking water is provided to all Albertans.

Mr. Johnson: My final question to the same minister: who can my constituents call if they can no longer drink from their water well because of fears of contamination?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, the fear of contamination, I think, is an important responsibility of each member in here when it comes to getting the facts out. There is a 25 to 30-year history of geological testing, mapping. The new standards that we introduced are all part of what the expectations are of Albertans. I think it's also important that any Albertan who has a concern can call the 24-hour environmental hotline, which is 1-800-222-6514. We will not only investigate. We'll work closely with the partners, with industry, with the proper testing to get to that ultimate blue gold that I talk about, that we'll continue to protect and sustain well into the next hundred years.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Métis Hunting Rights

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the government accepted the recommendations of an MLA task force on the interim Métis harvesting agreement, a document which has left a legacy of confusion and ill will that will take some time to heal. The question that remains is: how did the interim agreement ever see the light of day in the first place? My question is for the minister of aboriginal affairs. Why has the Minister of Justice, who was not involved in the writing of the interim Métis harvesting agreement, been handed the lead on this file?

Ms Calahasen: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, let me talk about what happened. I think that you have to understand process in government. There were negotiations that were determined by the three ministries: Alberta Justice, Sustainable Resource Development, and Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development – three ministries. At that point the negotiations took place with the Métis Nation of Alberta and the Métis Settlements General Council. Those negotiations then were determined in terms of recommendations that were brought to the table. Those recommendations were taken to Agenda and Priorities, and Agenda and Priorities directed us to take them to cabinet. At that point cabinet made the decision that we would go ahead with the recommendations.

I would like to say a little bit about those interim Métis harvesting agreements. They have provided us with a way to be able to understand whether or not there were some areas that we needed to expand on, to change. As you know, they're called interim agreements. We were breaking new ground, Mr. Speaker. We were making every attempt to make sure that nothing would happen out in the field that would create chaos. What we wanted to do was to be able to ensure that the province continues to manage its natural resources.

Mr. Tougas: To the same minister: in that the infrastructure minister was quoted as saying in reference to the aboriginal affairs minister that she didn't take it through the process, that it was there before we knew it was there, why did the minister circumvent her own party's rules and push through this agreement?

Ms Calahasen: Well, Mr. Speaker, I just outlined what process we utilized. In terms of whoever said what, I don't go into he said, she said, they said, whatever. What I deal with are the issues. The issue of the day was to be able to see what we could do in terms of making sure that we had issues that we had to deal with. We wanted to make sure that there would be no chaos out in the field. We had to ensure that we were going to get people to come to the table. The Métis Nation and the Métis Settlements General Council said that they would come and negotiate with us, which we did in good faith. I think that in terms of what the situation was, we had a really good group of negotiators, who, I think, deserve a lot more than what you're saying, Mister.

Mr. Tougas: At least I got a "Mister" out of it.

Now, after more than a year under an agreement that granted Métis wide-ranging hunting rights, how is the minister now going to tell the Métis people that the rights they have today may no longer apply tomorrow?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, answering on behalf of the Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Alberta has always been a leader in recognizing the Métis culture and Métis society. We wanted to negotiate an agreement that struck a balance between the rights of Métis people and legitimate concerns with respect to fish and wildlife conservation. So the interim agreements have served their purpose. We did have to respond at the time to the Powley decision, a decision of the Supreme Court of Canada. The MLA committee was struck to address the concerns that arose as a result of the interim agreement. In the course of preparing the report, this committee has consulted with First Nations, with Métis organizations as well as conservation groups, outdoor organizations, and members of the public. I'm optimistic that the new agreement is going to ensure hunting and fishing opportunities for all Albertans while respecting the constitutional rights of aboriginal peoples.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Seizure of Vehicles in Prostitution-related Offences

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. In May of 2005 this Legislature passed Bill 39, which corrected deficiencies in an earlier bill which allowed the seizure of vehicles involved in prostitution offences. Last May the government indicated that it expected proclamation of Bill 39 by last fall, and even just six weeks ago the then Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation said that he expected proclamation within the next month or so. Well, residents in inner-city neighbourhoods that are plagued with this problem continue to wait and are getting increasingly impatient. My question is to the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation. Given that our neighbouring provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba have had vehicle seizure laws involving prostitution offences in place for several years, why is it taking Alberta so long to proclaim its own legislation?

2:20

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, it is true that this is taking much longer than we had anticipated. We had hoped that we would be able to be at a point where we could proclaim the act much sooner. Currently we are continuing to work on the regulations. There has to be a lot of consultation with the law enforcement side and with other aspects of seizing a vehicle. So we're hoping that it can be proclaimed very shortly because it's extremely important to curb prostitution.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Can the minister perhaps be a little more precise as to exactly when residents of neighbourhoods who are impacted by street prostitution can expect these negotiations to be complete, and can the minister assure the House that this legislation will be proclaimed before this Legislature rises from its spring sitting?

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's very hard for me to assure the hon. member that it will be proclaimed before this session rises. I don't know when it's going to rise. Perhaps he does, but I sure don't. I've got to tell you that we are continuing to work on all of the aspects of this exercise. It's not quite as easy as it looks on the surface because we are taking property before a court case, so there are some unique aspects of this kind of legislation. But we are working on it. I hope that we can proclaim it very shortly.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Would the minister please be a little bit more expansive as to the precise nature of the difficulties or the issues that need to be negotiated before the legislation can be proclaimed? Could he itemize those for us?

Mr. Lund: As I indicated, there are a number of administrative procedures that we have to go through in order to seize a vehicle. It also gets into a whole area with the RCMP, the city police, and other law enforcement agencies, exactly how they're going to handle this situation. As I said earlier, really what we are doing is we are seizing vehicles prior to there being a conviction or going to court. So that whole administrative procedure is one that we have to be sure that we're on solid ground and are able to do. We all know that it's the right thing to do, but legally it's sometimes difficult to work our way through and make sure that we can do it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Skilled Labour Shortage

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A number of construction union constituents advise me that they find it difficult to obtain employment in their trade and that the supposed shortage of skilled workers in Alberta is a figment of this government's imagination. Apparently, many union workers line up at union halls in search of work. I also hear that for this very reason local unions oppose the possibility of importing skilled workers from abroad. However, I have some conflicting information that I need clarification on. To the Minister of Human Resources and Employment: has the minister examined correspondence issued by Alberta union local 488 dated July 25, 2005, addressed to their U.S.A. counterpart union requesting a transfer of 10,000 workers from the U.S.A. to Alberta?

Mr. Cardinal: That's what happens when you have a good government and a strong economy and thousands of jobs. Mr. Speaker, I have seen the letter that the member is referring to but certainly cannot speak about why a particular union may take one position or another. That is their business. But I can say one thing: there is definitely a shortage of labour in Alberta. It is real. There is a real shortage. Alberta's economy has created skills and labour shortages throughout the province and does create many challenges for us.

As everybody knows here in this House and in the province, we are going to have over 400,000 jobs in the next 10 years, and with the existing processes we have, we can only create 300,000 jobs. Mr. Speaker, that is a challenge. But you can be assured that we still have the Alberta priority of hiring Albertans first, Canadians, ensuring that there's mobility throughout the country, and of course there are aboriginal persons, persons with developmental disabilities. The aboriginal youth, I've always mentioned, is one very important area. There are 200,000 aboriginal youth aged 15 to 25 years old, and there's lots of unemployment and underemployment on those reserves.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I will be tabling that letter later.

To the same minister: is the writer, Mr. Rob Kinsey, correct in stating that as of spring 2006 there are some 3,000 steam fitter, pipefitter, and welder positions available in Alberta?

Mr. Cardinal: As I said before, Mr. Speaker, there are skills and labour shortages in many sectors throughout the province because of our strong economy and good government, of course. We can't say exactly how many positions are available in these occupations because the companies in Alberta do not by law have to report what positions might become available and may be reported.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is confusing. Is there a shortage of skilled labour? Are unions opposed to importing workers from abroad? Which one is it?

Mr. Cardinal: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I said before, there are skills and labour shortages in many sectors throughout the province because of our strong economy and good government. Again, one thing I want to say: I can't speak on behalf of any union and what the union wants to do. I've said that before in this House. The unions run their own shops, and I think that in a lot of cases they do a good job.

Our government, on the other hand, is spending close to \$300 million, Mr. Speaker, to help support and ensure that people get the

proper training they deserve. Maybe the Minister of Advanced Ed would want to supplement on this.

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

Funding for Wellness Initiatives

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Incoherence, poor planning, false assumptions, and fearmongering have been the highlights of this government's health strategy. On top of that, the government is constantly saying one thing and doing another. My questions are to the minister of health. Given that the minister has claimed that we can reduce health system costs by promoting the health of children, why does the government refuse to support a school nutrition program?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, the school nutrition program, as well explained by my colleague the Minister of Education, would be under the auspices of the school in terms of the school trustees, the local priorities. So school nutrition programs are not a part of my mandate.

However, the school boards, the Ministry of Education, myself, and the Ministry of Children's Services co-operate on a number of programs that benefit schoolchildren, including the physical fitness program that has been initiated, where students are receiving regular physical fitness. Many of the conversations we've had on the cross-ministry initiatives – both the ACYI, administered by the Minister of Children's Services, and the health initiatives lend themselves to conversations about improving the wellness of all Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday, for example, in Eastglen school there was a wonderful demonstration of mental health awareness in launch of mental health awareness week. So in many activities we're integrally involved. But the actual policy development and the initiation and delivery of that policy would be, essentially, the purview of the Minister of Education.

Ms Blakeman: Say one thing; do another.

Again to the minister of health: if this government truly wants to make the population healthier, why was the funding for the Alberta tobacco reduction strategy cut in this year's budget?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, we had hoped to take very real advantage this year of federally initiated and advertised programs, particularly as it came to national ads. There were some excellent demonstrations of advertisements, television ads that we believed could enable us to divert some of our funds into other areas. Through the chair of AADAC, the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, we will be undertaking further investigation of what we should do to make sure that we reach those target audiences where tobacco has been apparently on the increase. But we're very pleased with the results we're getting for 15-, 16-, and 17-year-olds.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the minister of health: when will the minister stop blaming individuals for rising health care costs and support programs that will truly reduce the cost in the public system, like a pharmacare program?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have been working on a pharmacare program, but this minister has never once blamed individuals. This minister has cited a number of the rising costs in health care. Many governments are doing exactly what this government is doing. We're looking at those cost drivers and how

we can maximize efficiency in some areas, how we can improve wellness, and how we can in fact target those areas not only of the rising costs of pharmaceuticals but also use more evidence-based information for improving and adding to our system. We look forward to making some of those cost efficiencies really benefit Albertans as well as benefit the health care system overall.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in a few seconds from now I will call on the first of six to participate, but first of all we'll have our historical vignette of the day.

Vignettes from the Assembly's History

The Speaker: This will be part 2 of an historical overview. On March 21, 1940, Albertans elected their second Social Credit government with 42.9 per cent of the votes and 36 of 57 seats. For the first time in our history the Liberal Party was neither the government nor the second-largest party in the House. Nineteen independents were elected with 42.4 per cent of the votes. Liberals elected one member.

The election of August 8, 1944, saw the Social Credit government returned with 51.88 per cent of the votes and 51 of 57 seats. The second-largest grouping was three independents with 16.75 per cent of the votes. Two Co-operative Commonwealth Federation MLAs were elected with 24.92 per cent of the vote. There were no registered Liberal candidates in the election of 1944.

On August 17, 1948, 55.63 per cent of Albertans voted Social Credit and returned 51 of 57 MLAs. The CCF polled 19.13 per cent of the votes and elected two members, as did the Liberals with 17.86 per cent of the votes.

Four years later on August 5, 1952, the largest number of political parties ever, 13, contested the election. The Social Credit Party received 56.24 per cent of the votes and elected 53 of 60 MLAs. Three Liberals were elected with 22.37 per cent of the votes.

On June 29, 1955, in Alberta's 50th anniversary year, 37 of 61 seats went to the Social Credit Party with 46.42 per cent of the votes. The Liberals elected 15 members with 31.13 per cent of the votes.

In Alberta's 14th election, held on June 18, 1959, 55.69 per cent of Albertans elected 61 Social Credit members out of 65 seats. The Progressive Conservative Party elected one MLA with 23.88 per cent of the votes. For the first time in Alberta's history a political party received more than 200,000 votes; Social Credit received 230,283 votes.

Almost four years to the date later, June 17, 1963, the Social Credit Party won 60 of 63 seats with 54.81 per cent of the votes. Two Liberals were elected with 19.76 per cent of the votes.

In Canada's 100th year and on May 23, 1967, 44.60 per cent of Albertans returned 55 of 65 MLAs to the Legislature as Social Credit MLAs, and six Progressive Conservatives were elected with 26 per cent of the votes. The New Democratic Party received 16 per cent of the votes and elected no MLAs while the Liberals elected three MLAs with 10.81 per cent of the vote. This was the ninth election victory in a row for the Social Credit Party.

The score to date is four Liberal governments, three United Farmers of Alberta governments, nine Social Credit governments.

Tomorrow, part 3.

head: **Members' Statements**

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

Red Deer Vipers Hockey Team

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you probably know, Red Deer is located on the busy, booming corridor between Calgary and Edmonton. Because Red Deer is the centre of paradise, not only

do we have the privileges of cheering for our own teams – the Rebels, the Chiefs, and the Vipers – but we have the glorious opportunity to choose between Alberta's great teams in Edmonton and Calgary. In fact, it's not unusual to see a car going down the road in Red Deer with an Edmonton Oilers flag on one side and a Calgary Flames flag on the other.

Last night the Edmonton Oilers fans had the chance to celebrate a great first-round victory against the Detroit Red Wings in the Stanley Cup playoffs, and last night the Edmonton fans were erupting with joy. Alas, the Calgary fans were sad because they have to wait for the seventh game to celebrate, we hope.

Red Deer, however, gets to celebrate a great victory for one of their very own teams, the junior B Red Deer Vipers. The junior B Vipers are a team of young men between the ages of 18 and 20 who play hockey for the love of the game. Some players work, some go to school, and some work and go to school while they play hockey. With hard work and dedication these young hockey players earned the title of Alberta junior B champs for the second time in three years and the western Canadian champions, the highest honour for this level of hockey.

Mr. Speaker, please let me congratulate the players and the coaches of the Red Deer Vipers: Jared Brookes, Dan Saniszlo, Cody Mast, David Horsley, Ryan Kure, Dave Dow, Devon Haley, Brent Foord, Jay Adams, Kelly Rogers, Ryan Lund, Ryan Edgeworth, Brian Renaud, Colin Christensen, Randy Kloss, Dave Kozlowski, Brett Sparks, Taylor Britton, Stephen Gebbink, Bryce Campbell, Mark Walper, Adam Casemore, Mark Horsley; coaches Mel Christensen, Trevor Stoddard, Nick Kletke, Barry Brookes; their general manager, Gilbert Renaud; and their trainer, Lynn Richards.

Mr. Speaker, go, Vipers, go. Go, Oilers, go. Go, Flames, go. Long live hockey.

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

Wetaskiwin Leaders of Tomorrow Awards

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and recognize the achievements of a diverse group of young individuals from my constituency. Each and every year Wetaskiwin and Camrose hold separate award ceremonies honouring the volunteer achievements of young Albertans in the area. The leaders of tomorrow awards recognize and highlight the commitment to community which is displayed by the nominees. The age of those nominated ranges from six years of age all the way up to 25. While only eight people receive the leaders of tomorrow awards, being nominated is a sign of the commitment which these young people have shown to a variety of causes. The nominees volunteer for many varied organizations, helping out many different parts of their community.

On April 24 the dedication of four young people from Wetaskiwin and area was recognized. The recipients at this award ceremony were Destiny Schmidt, Katherine Fraser, Sonja Fedorak, and Christopher Kirwan.

On April 26 four outstanding individuals from Camrose and area were honoured for their achievements. The recipients at this award ceremony were Shawn Eelhart, Jodi Harrison, Jamie Wold, and Jennifer Redstone.

Each of the winners as well as all of those nominated have demonstrated a strong interest in making their communities a better place to live. I look forward to seeing what amazing feats all of these young people will accomplish in the years to come. These individuals have been recognized by their communities as the leaders of tomorrow, and their actions leave no doubt that they are also leaders of today.

Thank you.

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

Universal Child Care

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Universal child care and caregivers. This past Saturday, April 29, the hon. members for Edmonton-Mill Woods, Calgary-Currie, Calgary-Mountain View, and myself sponsored a child care public forum at the Banff Trail Community Centre, located in the Calgary-Varsity constituency. Sixty-four individuals from a variety of child care backgrounds, including stay-at-home mothers and fathers, public and for-profit daycare workers and owners, representatives and care providers from before and after school care organizations, shared their concerns. Regardless of their personal situation or their varying approaches to providing care, the common message that they shared was their love and concern for the well-being of children.

2:40

They also stressed the need to raise government awareness of the importance and the value of caring for children, whether in the home or in an accredited institution. They praised the Alberta Children's Services minister for the bold five-point plan which she had negotiated with the former federal minister, Ken Dryden, as a good first step. The plan recognized the need for accreditation and funding increases for institutional caregivers as well as financial support for stay-at-home parents. Everyone present called upon our provincial Minister of Children's Services to honour her commitment to the principles of the five-point plan regardless of Prime Minister Harper's failure to recognize the importance of and to fund the inclusive plan that was 18 months in the making. They urged us and through us the Minister of Children's Services to work with them to create and fund a made-in-Alberta plan which recognizes both the value of children and their caregivers, whether within or outside of the home.

We have pledged our commitment to work with and assist in the organization of child care committees as well as to hold child care public forums throughout the province. Today's children determine tomorrow's future.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Portage College Sports and Education Dinners

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On April 28 and 29 Portage College hosted two major fundraising events in Cold Lake and Lac La Biche. The annual sports and education dinners saw 240 participants in Cold Lake and 250 in Lac La Biche.

The headline speakers were two well-known Albertans: former NHL hockey star and Stanley Cup winner Brian Skrudland and world long drive champion Jason Zuback, who has won the championship an unprecedented four times. The funds raised from these two popular events will go towards supporting learners of Portage College through bursaries and scholarships. Additional speakers included scholarship recipients Richard Baikie and Belva Cardinal as well as local athletes, Canadian bodybuilding champion Tammy Becotte, and former NASCAR driver Ken Staples.

The result of these two fundraising events was that more than \$35,000 will be added to the scholarship endowment at Portage College for future learners. There is hope that these funds will be matched perhaps on a 2 to 1 basis from the access to the future fund through the Department of Advanced Education. This could generate an additional \$70,000, bringing the total amount raised in the two events to over \$100,000 in scholarship funds.

At the Lac La Biche event Canadian Natural Resources announced

a generous donation of \$150,000 to Portage College to demonstrate the commitment of CNRL to the communities they serve in north-eastern Alberta. We thank them for their continuing support.

Mr. Speaker, I am very happy to see these initiatives geared at improving our postsecondary services for students in northern Alberta.

Thank you.

Motion Picture Industries Association Awards

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, this past weekend in the city of Edmonton 1,000 members and friends of the Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association gathered to honour and recognize the best in class. I was privileged to join about 20 of our colleagues from the Assembly at the 32nd annual film and television awards gala dinner. More than 600 entries resulted in a total of 53 category winners ranging from best actor and actress to cinematography, costume design, and finally, best overall production. The big winner of the evening was the film *Waking Up Wally*, which most in the Assembly will recognize as the Walter Gretzky story.

Mr. Speaker, an evening like this past weekend gives one a brief glimpse into the incredible potential this renewable resource has for our province. We have more than 3,000 Albertans earning a living as members of our unions and guilds in their roles as cameramen, actors, grips, costume designers, writers, directors. Of course, the foundation of our industry is made up of the hundreds of producers and production companies and small businesses that serve this great industry. Many of those small businesses, which range from caterers to equipment rental firms to hotels and restaurants, are located in rural Alberta. Many of the productions recognized this past weekend were filmed in locations such as Drumheller, Canmore, High River, Bragg Creek, Peace River, and Longview.

I should point out that the Alberta motion picture awards, known as the Rosies, is the largest provincial event of its kind in Canada, a tribute to the commitment and enthusiasm of the people that make up our film and television industry. So today I would like to recognize these 53 award winners and all of the committed Albertans that make the Alberta film and television industry the envy of Canada, an industry we can all take pride in.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Groundwater Safety

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On gas migration and groundwater. Alberta has a brilliant future in energy development, both nonrenewable and renewable, but it must be done right. Public health and safety comes first. Water quantity and quality are paramount in ensuring people's health and livelihoods.

It has long been known that many groundwater sources in rural Alberta contain hydrocarbons, especially methane gas. The question that continues to be asked by landowners and not answered by regulators is whether the gas is indigenous to the water well or it migrated into the water from nearby oil and gas activities. Industry has done investigations, and little public information is available. There is now substantial evidence from laboratories and researchers across the province that gas has migrated into aquifers in some instances due to fossil fuel extraction. However, this has not been systematically examined to identify specific causes and remedies. We don't know what we need to know to assure citizens, especially rural landowners, that their lifeblood is safe.

Several steps are needed to ensure safe, sustainable groundwater. Number one, Alberta Environment must establish a valid, reliable baseline testing protocol, both quantitative and qualitative, for

groundwater in conjunction with scientists and laboratories. Number two, Alberta Environment and the EUB should establish a public and independent groundwater committee on gas migration and groundwater to oversee the investigation of groundwater problems, starting in the Horseshoe Canyon, and make recommendations. Number three, Alberta Environment should move quickly to establish accurate groundwater mapping as a priority in the Horseshoe Canyon. Number four, the Energy and Utilities Board must review and implement the best available technology for CBM extraction to ensure minimal adverse effects. Number five, the Environment and Energy ministries should consider a multistakeholder organization similar to the Clean Air Strategic Alliance to review and make recommendations on CBM to ensure that regulations reflect the priority of environmental protection and groundwater protection.

Future generations will judge us on the degree to which we face our ignorance of our groundwater, learn what we need to, and prevent further migration of hydrocarbons into our aquifers.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Presenting Reports by Standing and Special Committees

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Standing Committee on Private Bills has had certain bills under consideration and wishes to report as follows. The committee recommends that the following private bill proceed: Bill Pr. 1, Burns Memorial Trust Amendment Act, 2006.

The committee recommends that the following private bills proceed with amendments: Bill Pr. 2, Mary Immaculate Hospital of Mundare Act, and Bill Pr. 3, Edmonton Community Foundation Amendment Act, 2006.

As part of this report I will be tabling five copies of the proposed amendments to bills Pr. 2 and Pr. 3.

Mr. Speaker, I request the concurrence of the Assembly in these recommendations.

The Speaker: Will all hon. members who concur in the report please say yes.

Hon. Members: Yes.

The Speaker: Would those who oppose please say no. It's carried.

head:

Presenting Petitions

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

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table a petition that I received from staff and students from the Nordegg school in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta. I have six copies from the six petitioners, who are proposing some initiatives they believe could be used to curb an increase in teen smoking.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have, actually, three different batches of petitions. I'll present them as one. They total 3,126 signatures. These are all from people who were protesting the government's third way, asking them to abandon those third-way plans – obviously, they were successful – asking to

defeat legislation expanding private, for-profit hospitals, and asking the government to uphold the Canada Health Act.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table a petition from my constituency in St. Albert, which totals 75, regarding the implementation of the third way, which will drain key resources of the public system, and the contravening of the Canada Health Act. The same with the petition from 204 constituents in rural Alberta. I'd like to table these with the gentleman to my left.

Thank you.

head: 2:50 **Tabling Returns and Reports**

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table a memo dated April 18, 2006, from Corinne McCabe and Bob Holt, executive directors with the Edmonton public school board. The memo refers to the board's proposed planning base for 2006-2007 and notes an anticipated \$7 million deficit for the 2005-2006 school year.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling today five copies of the *Alberta Gazette*, part 1, February 28, 2006. It clearly shows that there was a correction in the *Gazette* which shows that the land in Fort McMurray sold to Fort McMurray Housing Inc. was sold for \$2.8 million, not the \$2,800 that was formerly indicated. I can inform the Speaker as well that there will be another erratum. In fact, this one still says that it's block 1, lot 2, and there were two parcels: block 1, lot 1 and lot 2. It's interesting to note that this land was appraised at \$1.8 million, and we received \$2.8 million for it.

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

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table a letter to which I earlier referred from union local 488 to their U.S.A. counterparts, advising that this government is "conspiring" to import workers from Venezuela, South Korea, India, or Pakistan but instead invites 10,000 workers from the United States.

Thank you.

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Committee of Supply

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

head:

Main Estimates 2006-07

Government Services

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you very much, and good afternoon, colleagues. Thank you for the opportunity to move the estimates for Government Services and speak to the business plan for 2006 to 2009.

Government Services touches the lives of Albertans each and every day. Whenever someone in Alberta registers their car, buys a house, starts a business, or needs help to deal with a consumer issue, they are accessing the services, products, and information offered by my ministry, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to share with you today the business and financial plan that we've outlined for the next three years to ensure that we continue to provide these and many other services to Albertans effectively and efficiently.

Before I do that, I want to thank the previous ministers that have taken over this posting and have done a great job and made my job a lot easier. This department is very well run, and I have to tell you that I'm so very, very proud of the staff that work for Government Services but, more importantly, work with me. Up in the gallery today we have with us my assistant, Daryn Fersovich, who came with me from the chairmanship of the standing policy committee on energy. He has been learning this posting with me and has been doing a great job. Beside him is Colleen Quartly. Colleen has been just an outstanding member of my team in the office.

Mr. Chairman, I'll start by giving you an overview of the three core businesses. First, we provide efficient and secure access to government programs and services. This includes our licensing and registration services as well as the Service Alberta website, a new addition to Government Services, and the Service Alberta call centre, which was recently transferred to Government Services from the Public Affairs Bureau.

Some of the staff that has just joined us I'd like to also introduce. Like I said earlier, I've had just a great team that have got me up to speed with this ministry. I'd like to mention the deputy minister, Mr. Robert Bhatia. Robert would have been here today, but his mom was in a car accident, and he's where he should be: with this family. He has given me the opportunity to work with some great people: Laurie Beveridge, the assistant deputy minister of consumer services and land titles; Wilma Haas, the assistant deputy of Service Alberta and registries; Sue Kessler, the acting assistant deputy minister for program support services; Lori Cresey, our senior adviser officer; and Cathy Housdorff, our communications director. Cathy has been very, very valuable to me, giving me advice on the many people issues that we deal with. Also today joining some of the staff is Donna Rogers. Donna, as most of you know, served the previous Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations and Infrastructure and Transportation. She has been around here for a while, so when Donna says something, I just say, "Yes, Donna, I'll do that, thank you," and I just get to work.

Anyway, about our ministry. As well as the Public Affairs Bureau, we deal with the second core business, and it's to support a fair and effective marketplace here in Alberta. We do this by regulating a variety of businesses that provide services to Albertans and by providing consumers the information they need about their rights and responsibilities. Also, under our second core business the Utilities Consumer Advocate represents the interests of Alberta residential farm and small commercial consumers in the restructured utilities market. They work towards improvements in the regulatory process and the service delivery. I think most of you here know my background in this Legislature on protecting consumers on the utilities side, so I'm very much interested in working with these folks within my ministry.

Finally, our third core business is that we provide strategic leadership in information management and access and privacy protection. That includes the responsibility for Alberta's privacy legislation and overall approaches for managing the information of government.

In providing these core businesses to Albertans, Government Services strives to fulfill our vision to serve Albertans with excellence and innovation.

Now to our business plan. Mr. Chairman, to effectively manage our core businesses, we developed our business and financial plan by prioritizing our programs and services to focus resources on the most critical areas. To do so, we considered the impacts on Albertans, our legislative mandate, the financial benefits realized, and the opportunity for future expansion of the program. We also took into consideration the growing challenges facing us as a government and as a ministry.

The biggest challenge we face is simply how fast this province is growing. According to a recent Stats Canada report, Alberta's population increased by more than five times the national average during the last three months of 2005. That's amazing. You ask me: what was that? It was more than five times the national average during the past three months of 2005. Our economy has also been growing by leaps and bounds, bringing with it, you know, a wealth of new opportunities for this province.

3:00

Our economic and population growth also brings us new challenges. This is particularly true for Government Services. As I outlined earlier, Government Services delivers many of the day-to-day services that the provincial government provides to Albertans. They demand that the services increase as our population does. For example, Mr. Chairman, with the significant increase in the numbers of homes being built, bought, and sold in Alberta, there's an equally significant increase in land title transactions.

I have to tell you about an experience that Daryn and I had down in Calgary when we went to the land titles office. These queues of documents come in each and every day, and in each file there's a land transaction. They deal with files not in numbers of one, two, or three; they deal with it at six feet as an average working day. Six feet of files. The day or two previous to the day that we visited the land titles folks down in Calgary, 12 feet of transactions came in. It's amazing, the volumes and volumes of work that this department does, and they can only keep up because they're so experienced and so dedicated, Mr. Chairman. I'm so very, very proud of the fact that we have people that can take on that work, take on that challenge, and deliver to Albertans each and every day.

We experienced an increase of nearly 975,000 land transactions, including both registration and searches, this year compared to '04-05. This upward trend is expected to continue as well. That's what I talk about when I talk about six feet a day of files in an office, and all of a sudden one day 12 feet appears. You know, there's a huge, huge increase in the workload that Government Services staff have.

The increase in homes being built has also put pressure on consumers, who seek reputable contractors and tradespeople. We hear from members from Calgary who talk about a home being completed every 45 minutes in Calgary. The growth is just amazing in parts of our province, and all that growth is managed through Government Services. This challenge translates into an increased workload for our staff that investigate consumer concerns. Demands on our motor vehicle and vital statistics registries are also on the rise, with no end in sight. As we all know, with 65,000 Albertans moving to this great province each and every year, they need services, and Government Services staff and this ministry will deliver. In addition to the increases in the sheer volume of transactions, we're also seeing an increase in expectations. Albertans expect a very, very high level of service, and we plan on delivering, Mr. Chairman. You can count on that.

But more than ever Albertans expect us to be diligent in identifying mortgage and identity fraud and ensuring the security of the documents and the information that we hold. For this reason, Mr. Chairman, my ministry will colead one of the government's eight

top priorities, and that's protecting people's personal information. We talked a little bit about this with staff in the last while. We do a little exercise in our home. We have a shredder in our home, and my mom and my sister and my brother bring documents to our house every time we have a birthday or a gathering. They use our shredder, and they're shredding these documents.

I think each and every one of you have probably received a credit card in the mail, and it says: just simply call in and activate this and sign it, and you've got a credit card. Well, you know, identity theft is on the rise, and when we have the activity that we do here in this great province, we also have some con people that are out there willing to take advantage of people. So I've talked with our staff. Maybe we need to make consumers aware of the risks of taking one of those credit cards that we get in the mail or taking our utility bills and just throwing them in the garbage. A lot of us rural MLAs that live a couple of blocks from here that like to walk to work – and I've talked to most of you – have all seen people digging through the bins, and you never know what they come up with. Mr. Chairman, maybe we're going to have to have a shred day or something like that in Alberta to teach people about the value of the identity theft that may be occurring each and every day in our back alleys. Maybe we're going to have to do something like that to make Albertans aware.

But, Mr. Chairman, we also need to improve Albertans' awareness of the services offered by the ministry so that they know where to turn when they need us and of the renewal of our personal property, land titles, and motor vehicle registry systems so that we can meet the growing demands for the services and increased security requirements.

Mr. Chairman, keeping the extensive portfolio of legislation and regulations that we're responsible for current and responsive to emerging issues is very, very important. You know, Government Services is up to the challenge, and we are continually striving to enhance our services to meet the growing demands. I'd like to outline for you now some of the specific opportunities that we have identified to improve service delivery in many areas of the ministry through the strategic application of resources and technology.

In support of our three core businesses we have prioritized our programs and services to focus our resources on five major goals. Our first and our highest priority is "efficient licensing and registration services." You know, we work hard to make sure that our registry services are accessible, affordable, and secure. As stewards of personal information of Albertans, Government Services has the responsibility to ensure the integrity of this registry information and protect it from all risks, Mr. Chairman.

Of the five registries that exist in Government Services, vital statistics produces documents that are amongst the most sought after by identity thieves. You know, these documents, such as birth certificates, can be used to obtain other important documents such as drivers' licences and credit cards, so we're developing a more coordinated and integrated approach to security solutions for the vital statistics registry. Changes include improvements in the physical transfer and storage of registry documents, information technology access to registries, and processes that promote compliance with any security measures.

We are also committed to keeping our fees affordable and are confident that our key services will remain competitively priced below the national average for similar services. Mr. Chairman, I have had lots of discussion with our staff to make sure that we are competitive and that we will remain competitive. We continue to provide examples every day of the Alberta advantage through such things as the low cost of registering your home. I bet most of you in this Assembly didn't know that currently we are 82 per cent below the national average on the cost of registering a home.

Mr. Danyluk: I didn't know that.

Mr. VanderBurg: The Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul didn't know that either, and I'm sure that most of us didn't know that.

On our automobile registration fees, most recently I've been given the information that we're 27 per cent below the national average, and our driver's licence fee most recently is 29 per cent below the national average. Mr. Chairman, these are figures that we can be very proud of. We are competitive, we offer a great service, and I'm not shy about telling Albertans about this fact.

In addition to measuring our fees, we also measure our success by ensuring that clients are satisfied with the services they receive from our registry agents, and, Mr. Chairman, they are. Albertans continue to be highly satisfied with the service provided by registry agents, and the most recent results show that 89 per cent of the clients using our registry services are satisfied. That's a pretty great figure.

You know, I would say that this is a significant accomplishment since Alberta's vibrant economy and population boom mean that our registry systems support over 17 million transactions every year. [interjection] The Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul says, "17 million?" Yes, it is 17 million. That's five transactions for each and every Albertan. Whether you're using our services electronically or at the door, that's a lot. I would say that over the next period we'll see even a greater pressure on our registry systems. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, economic growth is particularly evident in the record number of transactions completed by our land titles staff as well.

3:10

Mr. Chairman, extra funding in the past years for additional staff helped to ensure that turnaround times remained at acceptable levels and that client satisfaction remained strong, and it has. As economic growth in Alberta has continued, extra funding has been included once again in our budget to hire additional staff at land titles. I will stand here and I'll tell you, colleagues, that additional staff are needed because of the growth and because of the expectations that Albertans have for great service, and we'll provide that service.

We're also working to improve our systems to manage this growth, and as we progress further with our registry renewal initiative, we anticipate additional improvements to our service delivery for all registries. In total, our registry and licensing services account for 76 and a half million dollars' worth of expenses, and I'm glad to say that we generate revenue in excess of \$376 million. [interjection] The Member for Calgary-Shaw asked me to repeat that. We spend 76 and a half million dollars, and we collect \$376 million. Mr. Chairman, this is a great accomplishment for Government Services, and, you know, we contribute to the greater wealth of this province.

Our second goal relates to Service Alberta, where we strive to provide "efficient and convenient access to government information and services" across all delivery channels. The most recent result shows that 74 per cent of Albertans surveyed are satisfied with their access to government information and services and that 74 per cent are satisfied with the timeliness with which these services and information are provided. It's like I told my sons when they came home with their report card and said that they got 82 per cent or 74 per cent. I'd say, "Well, what about the other 26 per cent?" or "What about the other 18 per cent?" We can do better. We will, Mr. Chairman. I can guarantee that.

Effective April 1, 2006, government approved the transferring of the Service Alberta call centre, also known as the RITE centre, to Government Services from the Public Affairs Bureau. Mr. Chairman, that number remains 310-0000, and we all use that each and

every day, especially when we're travelling up and down the road. It's a handy number to know. Transferring this significant and well-used public service to our ministry provides a tremendous opportunity to fulfill our long-term goals for Service Alberta initiatives and to facilitate both the service improvements and operating efficiencies.

Mr. Chairman, I can talk for hours on this ministry, and I will.

The Chair: Hon. minister, you haven't moved your estimates yet. Would you like to do that?

Mr. VanderBurg: Oh, yes, Mr. Chairman. I did move that right at the beginning of my speech, but I will do that once again.

The Chair: We didn't get that.

Mr. VanderBurg: Okay. That's fine.

The Chair: That way, we have something to debate.
The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the clarification, and thanks to the hon. minister for moving his department's estimates for 2006-07. I respond in my capacity as Official Opposition critic for Government Services.

To begin with, I must emphasize the positive and functional relationship I have had with the former Minister of Government Services and his staff and now with this new minister, who just last week stood in this House and offered to co-operate with me and with all other Albertans. On Thursday of last week my researcher and I had the pleasure of meeting with the minister, the deputy minister, the communications director, and the minister's assistant. It was sort of a get-to-know-you type meeting and an informal discussion on the issues.

You know, Mr. Chairman, we have many opportunities in this House to act synergistically, but sometimes we don't seize those opportunities for whatever the reason may be. I can tell you, however, that this hon. minister is genuinely interested in co-operation for the benefit of all Albertans and in the interest of doing what's right for the land and its people. As such I, too, will reciprocate and will not only offer to work with him; I will insist on it. I also want to thank the staff at Government Services and wish them all the best.

Now we move to the budget estimates. As the minister mentioned, under Ministry Support Services on page 246 of the budget the estimate for the minister's office is \$402,000, which is an increase of 31 per cent over the 2005-06 forecast. Can the minister tell us why this increase was necessary and if it was planned ahead of time? Or was it only an effect of his assuming this new role? Will the minister be increasing the number of employees who are going to work in his office, and if so, why is it necessary? The increase for the deputy minister's office is not as pronounced, and I think that's good.

We move on to consumer services and land titles, which also appears on page 246. Line 2.0.1, program support, the estimate is \$607,000. Now, this is a 60 per cent increase over the 2005-06 forecast. Can the minister tell us why such a significant increase in funding was necessary? It's also interesting to notice that this particular program underspent by \$201,000 last year, based on the forecast figures. So can the minister tell us why in one year they're underspending, which is really good – you know, if they don't need to spend it, then they don't – but then all of a sudden there is an increase of such dramatic magnitude? Did the minister encounter

any serious concerns or complaints in program services last year to warrant such a big investment? How exactly will this additional funding be utilized, and how does he anticipate this money improving program supports?

I am moving on to Service Alberta and registries, which received a significant portion of the hon. minister's introduction this afternoon. On page 246 as well, under line 3.0.1, program support is increasing by 29 per cent over the '05-06 budget. It's now going up to \$840,000. Now, this is a significant increase, and again I would appreciate any clarification from the hon. minister as to why this increase in funding was necessary and why so drastically. Were there problems that occurred in program supports, or were there objectives that were not met; hence, the increase in funding?

Moving on to 3.0.2 on the same page, Service Alberta is now going to receive \$1.88 million, which is 22 per cent higher than was budgeted last year. Again, this is a significant case, in my view, of overspending. Why did Service Alberta exceed its budget last year and now are receiving more money this year? What factors contributed to that overspending? Service Alberta is essentially unchanged from when it was under the Public Affairs Bureau to now being under this hon. minister. So where is the discrepancy, and what's happening there? Also, from an efficiency standpoint we notice that the Public Affairs Bureau, after relinquishing this responsibility to the hon. minister, did not shrink in size. So they're not getting any smaller. This ministry is also growing. The program was transferred from A to B, but there's more money being pumped in and more FTE staff. Again, we need clarification from the hon. minister.

Moving on to 3.0.3, registry services, which is again a significant component of this ministry, are receiving an 18 per cent increase over the '05-06 forecast. It's now stipulated at \$26.4 million.

3:20

The Official Opposition continues to hear from Albertans who are very unhappy with the registry services. You know, it would be very hard to justify putting more money into a program that doesn't seem to be receiving a lot of favourable review from the citizens and from the customers that actually use that program. Most of those complaints are regarding the level of service or the quality of the service delivered. I know that the minister quotes satisfaction surveys and so on, but again it's a matter of how representative the sample data are and which people are responding and which people are withholding the response and so on and so forth. Mr. Chairman, as you know yourself as an MLA and as all members of this esteemed House already know, most of the questions raised pertain to the privatization of the registries and, as I mentioned, the services delivered and the quality of the service but also the fees charged and general questions with respect to privacy and security of information.

Today I was discussing this very subject with my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Manning, who is hoping to speak after me, and we agreed that we both like not having to wait in line for extended periods of time. Also, we like having the choice of location, hours of operation, et cetera. But what else did privatization accomplish? As I mentioned, we all receive complaints from constituents about the registry fees and how they have gone up substantially after privatization.

The hon. minister indicated that our registry fee structures are competitive compared to some other jurisdictions. But the question here is: are they really? Why hasn't there been a study conducted to fairly and independently evaluate the effects that this has had on fees? How can we be assured that, yes, indeed, we are competitive? Asking a person if they think \$20 is fair is different from comparing

our \$20 to the other jurisdictions in Canada. Also, how do we compare ourselves to ourselves, factoring in inflation and how costs typically rise, sort of a before and after assessment, before privatization versus after privatization, comparing Alberta to Alberta, not just Alberta to other jurisdictions like Saskatchewan and British Columbia?

Also, I would personally advocate for a periodic review of all the fees charged, both the government component and the registry agent part. We can probably say, "Let's do it every three to four years," for example, to make sure that Alberta is always in the bottom 25 per cent on the fee scale across Canada. So maybe it should be a target not only to assess satisfaction amongst the users or the customers that actually access registry services, but let's set it as a target for this government that we always have to be within the bottom 25 per cent on that fee scale.

If you're thinking more towards including the U.S.A. and Canada as one big region, you know, thinking about NAFTA or free trade, for example – and now particularly, as of today, for example, our dollar is at the 90-cent U.S. mark – how about expanding this registry fees review to include the northern or northwestern states as well to make it a comprehensive and thorough national/regional review?

Mr. Chairman, if I move to the business plan, page 203, under goal 8, ministry services, it states: "Maintaining a competitive licensing and registration fee structure in support of the Alberta Advantage." So, again, it's the idea of: where does that Alberta advantage extend and who does it extend to? When aiming to maintain a competitive structure, does the minister know how competitive we are today compared to, say, 10 or 12 or 15 years ago? That's the question of the before and after, as I mentioned before. If the minister has any statistics as to what is deemed to be attributed to inflation only versus the higher fees after privatization in terms of what percentage the government keeps for itself and what percentage the registry agents charge, then that would be very useful.

Moving on in the business plan, page 208, performance measure 1.c, comparing us to other jurisdictions: this is where I'm saying that we should really set our own goals to be in the bottom 25 per cent rather than just evaluating it. When it's convenient to highlight that we're competitive, then we do; when it isn't, then we don't talk about it. This is me trying to be the consumers' advocate, Mr. Chair. It's looking after business and allowing business to grow and services to be delivered more efficiently while at the same time looking out for our consumers and protecting them.

Another issue at the registries is security, and by that I mean two things: one, the ease with which one can fraudulently obtain government ID. We've received many communications from people in Alberta who have talked to the MLAs from the opposition about, you know, how it's very easy to obtain government ID or a birth certificate, for example. Number two is the security of the documents and information housed in or handled by registry offices. Continuous training and professional educational development for our registry agents are important. Fairly and adequately compensating them so that they don't yield to financial temptation is another angle. We can even add another layer here: empowering and protecting them so that they don't succumb to threats or bullying from organized crime and biker gangs, for example, all that stuff. Identity theft is a growing problem, and tackling it starts at the front line, at the local neighbourhood registry office front desk.

Before I conclude this point, Mr. Chairman, I just want to make an observation. I thought that after privatization this government was going to spend less on registries as it claims to be out of the business of doing business, but the trend is that they spend more

each year. The Auditor General in his 2004-05 report on page 211 indicated that the ministry spent \$37 million from 2002 to 2005 and now expects the costs to significantly exceed the original \$100 million estimates. They call it the registry renewal initiative.

Take into consideration, Mr. Chairman, please, that this is so while no significant work has been started on (a) the motor vehicle registry or (b) the registration subsystem of the land titles registry. So what exactly are we looking at here, and how can this be justified to Albertans, who are now being asked to fork out the money twice: right, as a registry services user or consumer paying more; left, as a taxpayer supporting more government spending on the registries? So we need clarification here, please.

Moving on, under the government and program support services estimates on page 246, line 4.0.1, this is a 16 per cent increase from the 2005-06 budget, a significant increase. Can the minister tell us why this increase was necessary? How exactly will this additional money be used? Were there concerns with program supports from last year that needed to be addressed?

Line 4.0.4, the estimate for legislative planning and freedom of information and privacy services is a 60 per cent increase – 6-0 – from the 2005-06 forecast, now going up to \$749,000. Now, this is very significant. I'm approaching this from two sides because I also look after freedom of information and the protection of privacy as the critic. So how much of this money is going into the implementation of the proposed amendments to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, which is now being discussed in this House under the title of Bill 20? Now, it's no secret, Mr. Chairman, that the opposition is definitely against the passage of certain parts of Bill 20, and we are concerned that some of this money might be used toward adding more layers of secrecy to a government that is already overly secretive.

When we met with the minister last week, as I mentioned, he assured us that he's interested in working with Albertans. I think that this is one area where he can demonstrate such genuine interest by agreeing to some of the amendments that the opposition is proposing to make the government open, transparent, and to hold them accountable. Adding more layers of secrecy now, especially with this estimate, is the wrong way to go.

3:30

Moving on to the Utilities Consumer Advocate, which was briefly mentioned by the hon. minister. I have to start by saying that my feelings go out to the deputy minister after his mother's car crash, and I wish her and him all the best.

The Utilities Consumer Advocate, as is evident on page 247, line 6.0.1, is receiving a 40 per cent increase from the '05-06 budget. Again, very significant. Can the minister tell us how exactly this money is going to be spent? How will the Utilities Consumer Advocate be improving his advocacy services for Albertans?

We raised this last year in budget debate, and we're doing it again this year, that we think it is not the proper way to go to have the Utilities Consumer Advocate, who advocates on behalf of citizens and people and consumers, be the same person as the deputy minister. He's wearing two hats, and we think that there is a conflict or at least that he might not be allocating the necessary time and resources to doing both jobs efficiently. Nothing against the person, but the question is with the scope, the mandate, and how effective this position is. Especially after deregulation many people have issues. Their only recourse is to go to the Utilities Consumer Advocate.

The role of the Utilities Consumer Advocate, Mr. Chairman, also comes into question because this government seems to think that the bulk of his job is to inform Albertans on why deregulation of utilities

was good for them. So it's more of a sales job rather than a recipient of complaints and somebody who reacts to those complaints. Why is this government increasing the budget to educate consumers about government policy instead of advocating on their behalf? Again, we think he should be at arm's length, and we think that it's time to separate the role of the deputy minister from that of the Utilities Consumer Advocate. If the minister agrees and if he takes that direction, I would not only be appreciative, I would actually support him and back him on that decision, the issue of impartiality and the issue of doing their job effectively.

Mr. Chairman, I can probably go on and on dissecting the line-by-line composition of this budget, but I can't help but drift back to the angle of consumer protection. Alberta does not have a stand-alone consumer protection act, unlike other jurisdictions. I know for sure that Ontario, for example, has one. Instead we have several little acts here and there dealing with various topics and instances but nothing central or paramount or overarching. So I think it's time now, in Alberta's second century, to look at a stand-alone consumer protection act, and it would be great if the hon. minister champions that cause and puts it forward. Again, this would be something that I would be in support of.

This is an item that I forgot earlier. On page 207, under core business 1, goal 1, strategy 1.3, to "undertake initiatives to validate and secure information held within the Ministry's registries." On the issue of privacy again, can the minister tell us exactly what initiatives are in place or what is being currently worked on, you know, to secure and ensure the safekeeping of information that is either housed in or processed by Alberta's registries? The issue of security does not only extend to the equipment or the computers or the records but also to the personnel and to make sure that these guys are trustworthy and that we are minimizing the possibility of leaks and waste and abuse.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you. You know, I appreciate the comments that the Member for Edmonton-McClung has made. I do expect that I'll have to give you some of the answers in writing because I don't think we'll have the time to cover it all. But we are working on the issues that you have raised.

Mr. Chairman, in the upcoming years we look forward to working with all ministries to enhance the services offered through the Service Alberta call centre and the content and functionality of the website that they offer. We'll also collaborate to develop a business and service delivery model that will position Service Alberta to deliver more services on behalf of government. For example, in order to meet changing expectations for licensing and registration services, we plan to implement online renewal of licences for regulated businesses. I think that will really enhance the services needed. The Service Alberta initiative amounts to approximately \$2.4 million of our expenses.

Mr. Chairman, under our third goal we aim to ensure that Alberta has "informed consumers and businesses and a high standard of marketplace conduct." The success of this program is mainly measured by client satisfaction, which is very high for both the call centre and our tipsheets that we provide. Investigative services are evaluated based on the likelihood that a client would recommend this service to a friend, and our indication is that 84 per cent that have used the service would recommend it to a friend. I think that that figure speaks for itself.

Oversight and management of Alberta's residential tenancies legislation was also a major initiative related to this goal. This

legislation provides a framework for Albertans who rent their homes. As we talked about yesterday in this Legislature, we introduced in Edmonton a pilot service to handle landlord and tenant disputes without resorting to the courts. This service will allow Albertans to resolve tenancy issues in an effective and economical manner without placing an additional burden on the justice system. Mr. Chairman, 5,000 cases went to our courts last year dealing with residential landlord disputes. It's hoped that through this service we can divert about 1,500 of those cases through the Government Services ministry and provide a much quicker service and for sure a less painful method of resolving disputes rather than using the courts.

On other fronts, we'll continue to consult with industry and the public, and yes, to the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, I'll be working with you on issues that affect Albertans each and every day. To the Member for Edmonton-McClung, you had brought up issues that a lot of people that you talk with aren't happy with our service. Maybe that's because you're an opposition member – I don't know – but people come to me, and they're pretty darn proud of the service they get. But I'll make that commitment to you, right here in front of all our colleagues, that if you have any specific concerns and if people come to you that aren't satisfied, I'd ask you to write down their name, get their address, get their concern. We have staff up here that handle that. They specialize in dealing with people. Let's not just talk about "people are unhappy." Let's get those unhappy people and make them happy people, and let's get these stats up for all Albertans. So I'd like that commitment from you that you'd do the same.

Mr. Chairman, I think that we can serve Albertans in a much better fashion if we get everybody on the same page. Our department staff will ensure that those people are taken care of whether they are your constituents, mine, or the members' around here. All Albertans deserve good service, and we'll provide that.

On other fronts, Mr. Chairman, we'll continue to consult with our service providers in an effort to develop the most efficient structure for the Funeral Services Regulatory Board, just to name one. Again, the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung had brought this to my attention, and we will make sure that we enhance consumer protection dealing with those sensitive issues.

We allocate about \$10 million of our expenses to protecting and educating consumers. Again, the Member for Edmonton-McClung brought up the Utilities Consumer Advocate office. I would say, Mr. Chairman, that this service as provided is one of the gems of Government Services. You know, whether you have a concern or whether a constituent has a concern, we can just simply pick up the phone, call the Utilities Consumer Advocate, take it off your desk, put it on theirs, and when they phone the utility company, I'll tell you, they pay attention. That's what this service is for. I'm very proud of the fact that so many Albertans have received such great service out of our advocacy office, and they'll continue to. We'll get that message out to Albertans to make sure that this office is there for consumer protection. It's not there for the utility companies; it's there for consumer protection. So you can count on it that we'll be sending that message to Albertans over the next few months.

3:40

Mr. Chairman, our fourth goal – and this would cover off a lot of the points raised – is to provide effective advocacy for those 100 million residential, farms, and small consumers that receive utilities. The Utilities Consumer Advocate undertakes a number of vital activities, including ensuring that utility companies address those consumer questions and concerns in a timely and fair manner, not just the call centre. This is going to be in a timely, fair manner, and

those Albertans will get results, I can assure you that. Also, on the utilities advocate's interests with the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board and their other regulatory proceedings, we're there to make sure that consumers are represented. It's not our intention that we take over the intervenors that regularly attend, and I can tell you that there are lots of people that make a profession and a very good living intervening just for the sake of intervening. We're there to protect consumers.

In the coming three-year cycle the Utilities Consumer Advocate intends to improve representation of consumers at the regulatory hearings. If we need to bring in some specific witnesses or experts, we will, and we'll make sure that consumers' issues are taken care of. We'll make sure that we make Albertans more aware of the role that's offered by the UCA office, and we'll meet that challenge.

Mr. Chairman, I think most, especially the rural members, are aware that the new regulated rate option will come into effect this July, and we're going to make sure that the UCA will play a role informing consumers and stakeholders. I think especially the REAs, that represent the farm consumer out there, will need a little bit of help, and we'll provide that. Therefore, this year we're also implementing a program to build consumer understanding of their options in the restructured electricity and natural gas markets and increase the awareness of the services that the UCA can offer.

The UCA, let's not forget, is fully funded by the electricity and natural gas consumers through the electricity balancing pool and the natural gas distributors, respectively, at a cost of \$6.7 million per year. Any funds not required for the program in a given year are carried forward to the next year.

Mr. Chairman, I talked about five goals. I got through four of them, and our fifth and final goal is to provide "effective programs and services for information management, access to information and protection of privacy." Again, the Member for Edmonton-McClung had talked about the protection of privacy. Both the business community and the public make good use of our information services. We respond to over 180,000 calls and 10,000 e-mails per year and receive approximately 700,000 hits on our website per month. The member behind asked me, "How many hits was that?" That was 700,000 hits per month on our website. That's a lot of hits. I can tell you that I've used that website, and it's very friendly to users. Those of you that are interested, I encourage you to take the time to see how you can better serve your constituents by knowing that website a bit.

Mr. Chairman, new this year. Government Services will provide leadership through the development of best practices and educational tools for protecting people's personal information, a top priority of the government of Alberta and a top priority of this ministry. Another major initiative under this goal is our comprehensive review of Alberta's private-sector privacy legislation, scheduled to start by July of '06. This legislation establishes clear, concise, and common-sense rules for private-sector organizations that collect, use, and disclose personal information here in Alberta.

We also plan to work with the Provincial Archives of Alberta to develop a comprehensive digital preservation system to ensure that information of historical significance to the province is preserved digitally and can be accessed into the future. You can only imagine what we would have in our vaults across the province.

Nearly \$3.3 million of our expenses are allocated to information management, access to information, and protection of privacy services. I think that would answer another one of the questions that the Member for Edmonton-McClung has raised.

You know, as you can see from the programs and services that I've spoken about today, our ministry has a major impact on the lives of all Albertans. We take pride, Mr. Chairman, in delivering

high-quality services, and I'm very pleased that the government's new budget provides significant funding increases of over \$10.3 million to allow us to continue the level of quality. The additional funds will allow my ministry to address the many challenges that I've mentioned here today.

Of that funding, Mr. Chairman, \$3.2 million has been allocated to address the protection of personal information held in our registry system and to augment training and support for registry agents. Seven hundred thousand dollars has been added to our land titles division to address the increasing demand for services. Like I talked about, when I went into that office and they were dealing with six feet of files, all of a sudden one day 12 feet come in. You know, expectations of Albertans are high. They deserve good service. You can't do that by sitting on your hands and expecting the issue to go away. We need to recruit people, we need to get them into our training program, and we need to put them to work as fast as we can. The Member for Edmonton-McClung is nodding his head. I can tell that he understands this issue. This is a growth issue that we're facing in this province. We'll manage this. Maybe not to the expectations of Albertans instantly, but we'll manage this. I can assure you of that.

There was a million and a half dollars that will be used to address inflation areas and volume increases related to our information technology services. Like it or not, inflation exists, and we have to meet that.

I talked earlier about the pilot project for the opportunity for landlords and tenants to resolve disputes out of court. We'll spend about \$300,000 on that. That issue won't go away. It's my expectation that next year we'll be talking about this again. It'll be a higher figure. I really think that for this service, which we're going to offer Albertans once we do an evaluation of the one-year pilot project, you'll be hammering me for all Albertans. You'll say: why aren't we delivering this service to the folks down in Calgary or in Red Deer or in Mayerthorpe or in High Level? My answer to you will be that this has been a successful pilot project, and we'll have to find the resources.

You know, to think that we can deal with 5,000 cases of landlord/tenant disputes in the courts when we can have an opportunity through mediation – well, it's not even mediation. It's an opportunity to sit around, discuss this problem one-on-one, pay \$75 to do that, not hundreds and hundreds of dollars hiring lawyers. I think the court application alone is \$200. So I think that you'll be hammering me on this a year from now: why aren't we spending more to deliver this service throughout Alberta? I can tell you that we won't just jump into it. We'll evaluate the program, and you and I will talk about the successes of the program and how we're going to convince our colleagues around here to spend a little bit more money and deliver that service to all Albertans.

3:50

Also, you asked a bit about the extra money that has been spent on the access to motor vehicle information. Yes, we're spending almost an extra \$300,000 to expand our ability to review and ensure compliance of various users of motor vehicle information, so that's where we're spending it.

I think \$1.6 million also will go towards increasing public awareness of the services provided by the UCA, so you're going to see some information going out to Albertans. That has to come from somewhere. It'll come out of this budget and the increase that I'm defending here today and asking for your support.

Mr. Chairman, \$1.1 million of that increase will be used to fund government-wide increases in manpower costs. Again, that's a fact of life.

Finally, we've added an additional \$1.6 million for previously approved increases in amortization and minor adjustments for several programs.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I believe we put forward a fiscally responsible business plan that reflects our continued commitment to excellence in providing vital services to all Albertans.

At this time I'll sit down and hear from other speakers. If for some reason I haven't covered off every point that you've raised, my staff are making some notes and will provide you with some additional written information.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise and enter the debate on the motion that was put forward by the Minister of Government Services less than an hour ago, which is about approval of the estimates for the department for the current fiscal year, 2006-2007. I should extend my best wishes to the minister, who is relatively new to his portfolio. He seems to be already fully engaged with the challenges that he faces and the opportunities that he has in order to improve the delivery of services to Albertans that this government provides, to protect their private information, and to make information accessible to them better and faster than has been the case, looking at the record of this government.

Before I get into these issues and get into them in detail, let me quickly put on record the fact that the minister's and my acquaintance goes way back, long before either I was a member of this Assembly or he came in post the election of 2001. I was a young teacher, I guess, at the time in Whitecourt, and he was a very young student in the school where I was teaching. He reminded me as soon as he got elected. In fact, he produced a school yearbook of those times, which had a picture of me with a crewcut. It was kind of an interesting reminder.

An Hon. Member: No. You?

Dr. Pannu: That's right. I wondered if he almost violated my privacy by sharing that picture without first consulting with me. It was quite a pleasant reminder of my wife's and my stay and work in Whitecourt for a little over two years in the early '60s. I'm very pleased to now see this member as a colleague and as a minister doing the things that he is doing.

With respect to the estimates before us, I think many questions with respect to the budget items have been raised, and the minister tried to address several of them. One that I have is about the Utilities Consumer Advocate. There's a fairly large increase in the budget there, I think 40 per cent, from \$4.58 million for 2005-06 to 6.4-plus million dollars now. We do need some more information from the minister, although he tried to address this issue, I think, when the question was asked by my colleague from Edmonton-McClung. But more information would be helpful in satisfying me that the quite substantial increase that is showing in that line item is in fact justified and is something that I should vote for.

The ministry's business plan states on page 211, although the Utilities Consumer Advocate's budget is being increased quite substantially, that only 31 per cent of Albertans were aware of the roles and services that are provided by the same office, so a very small percentage, less than one-third, of Albertans are even aware that an office like this exists. I wonder what the reason for this is. It has to have something to do with more than just the fact that this office is only three years old. I think it was established in 2003, if I am correct, but that alone doesn't explain such a low level

of awareness among the Albertans who were surveyed with respect to what this office does.

My suspicion is that if the Utilities Consumer Advocate took more of a public stance on issues and concerns that are brought to his attention by Albertans, if he made his position public more often, if he advocated more than just sending back information when someone complained, that would be a better way of raising awareness than just, I suppose, spending money on increasing awareness through education. Education may be necessary – that is, provision of information on a broader scale – but building a more public advocacy profile for this office might be the way to go if Albertans are going to see much value in the money that this government plans to spend on this office. This office has to be more effective in the eyes of Albertans as an advocate on their behalf for them to have an interest in the office.

The business plan does set a new level of awareness, I guess about 50 per cent, but that's still, I think, very modest given the importance that was attached to this office when it was established in the wake of the deregulation of our utilities in this province and the public outcry over the negative impact that that deregulation had on their pocketbooks. It still continues to bother them to a very large extent.

One interesting report that the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate produced in February 2005 still noted concern over electricity deregulation. I know that this minister as an MLA before he became minister was very much involved in addressing those concerns. This report said that all of the five options suggested by Alberta Energy for the future of residential electrical sales would penalize bill payers and benefit sellers. The report's authors added that we are surprised and disappointed. Albertans expect and deserve that their government will protect their interest in this policy where the individual has little influence on options.

4:00

Clearly, the advocate's report here I think puts a finger on a very important issue. It seems that there may be a need to change the powers of the advocate, or some regulations surrounding those matters may have to be changed in order for the advocate to be able to be more effective in providing the protection against those deregulation policies. Better still, I think it might be important to heed the message in that report and perhaps revisit the question of deregulation and if that needs, in fact deserves a closer look for deregulating the system. In any case, there is a concern there that's expressed by the report, and I would like to hear the minister's response to that.

I think the report makes another interesting observation, Mr. Chairman. The consumer advocate's report does in fact express real skepticism about the eventual success of deregulation, based on his survey of the experience of other jurisdictions in North America where deregulation has not succeeded at all in meeting the expectations that were associated with that by the advocates of deregulation. Here's a quote from page 14 of the report which I think would be of interest to the minister.

Government's transition to a competitive retail market has the potential to impose additional costs and risks on small consumers who could face 40% to 45% higher prices based on the current offerings by competitive retailers.

This is on page 14, and the report, of course, is from 2005. It does raise questions about the future of deregulation given what the consumer's advocate has to say. So that's sort of one area.

I want to quickly switch, Mr. Chairman, to another issue which in the business plan is one of the core businesses of the department. It has to do with access by Albertans to the information that they may need about the government. Now, in that connection I think the report of the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner,

that the minister, I'm sure, is aware of – I think this was completed and presented to the government several months ago – has led in fact to the proposed changes in some of the legislation. Some of those changes are included in Bill 20.

While there are some I think justifiable responses by way of proposed changes in the legislation which address the concerns created by the PATRIOT Act in the U.S. and how it might impact the ability of the government to protect information related to Albertans, there are some other very unacceptable aspects of Bill 20, which I want the minister to perhaps look at. I'll be very happy to meet with him in the next day or two to see whether there is any room for making changes in the legislation so that it doesn't make it even more difficult for Albertans to have access to the information that's very, very important for them to make sure that the government has the levels of transparency that they expect this government to have.

The two items there that I have concerns about and have heard from other Albertans expressing concern about, including the press in this province, have to do with two sections, one which will make inaccessible, beyond the reach of Albertans, access to briefing books and briefing notes that the ministers have. I just want to remind the minister that it was that information included in briefing notes that led at the federal level to the sponsorship scandal becoming public. The rest is history. We know what's happened as a result. So that's one part of Bill 20 that I want him to perhaps pay some special attention to. As I said, I'll be very happy to meet with him on very short notice to see if he would be willing to discuss it with me.

The second has to do with the internal audit reports, that that information will not be accessible to Albertans for 15 years after the report had been prepared. That makes the situation worse than it is presently. So Bill 20 has parts of it which will make, in fact, access to information much more difficult and beyond the reach of Albertans, thereby defeating the very purpose of the act that's being amended.

Past that, I have some questions for the minister from the 17 recommendations that were made by the Information and Privacy Commissioner with respect to what needs to be done to change our existing statutes in response to the concerns expressed by the B.C. Information and Privacy Commissioner by way of a long, lengthy report on the impact of the PATRIOT Act in the U.S. and how we need to change our legislation to make sure that our information doesn't get called into courts without our knowledge and revealed to jurisdictions outside of Alberta and Canada.

Recommendations 3 and 4 deal with legislation. There are five recommendations there, Mr. Chairman, which deal with legislative changes, and I'm talking about numbers 4 and 5 of those recommendations. Recommendation 4 says:

Ensure that the offence provisions of the FOIP Act and the HIA . . . That is the Health Information Act.

. . . can be reasonably sustained, that is, the standard is not so high as to preclude a reasonable chance of conviction. The current standard is "willful".

I want to ask the minister what actions either he's proposing to take or the department may have taken already with respect to implementing recommendation 4. Similarly, recommendation 5 says, "Consider the advisability of making similar amendments to the Health Information Act." So those are the two recommendations. I hope the minister can answer that question or that at least he will take it under advisement and inform me about it later.

Mr. Chairman, then I go on to the section on the commissioner's conclusions, which is section 4.3 on page 36. In the last paragraph of that section on the commissioner's conclusions this is what it says:

The position of Canadian ICT outsourcers linked to US-based companies remains unclear and would benefit by reinforcement in law and in model contract provisions. These improvements to legal and contractual frameworks should be matched by more rigorous attention to outsource agreements management by public bodies which choose to use them.

My questions for the minister are these. Does the department have an up-to-date list of public bodies which use information contractors for technology purposes, outsourcers? Does it have a list of those public bodies that outsource this information? Secondly, is that list public? Will the minister make this list public? If it's not already complete, if this list is not up to date, if this list is not there, when does he expect this list to be completed? Unless that is done, any changes in legislation or policy will be all for naught.

Another question that I had is with respect to recommendation 13 under the section Policy/Operational. It's recommendation 13, the very last part of the recommendation. Again, given the pressures of time, I will not read the whole recommendation into the record but part of it.

Whether to make such policy into law poses a dilemma, as discussed. As stated, the decision to outsource is based on a large number of factors. The decision to outsource outside of Canada requires reconsideration of these factors in light of the fact that the public body is that much more removed from the outsourcer.

The reasons that are given are these:

- Different laws;
- Different customs (are laws pertaining to fraud, theft of information and so on regarded or enforced differently?);
- Different workforces (are the outsourcer's employees more transient, less reliable, more difficult to hold accountable, etc.?)

To conclude this recommendation, the Information and Privacy Commissioner gives very strong advice. It's that "the gains realized from outsourcing have to be weighed against the risks presented by the nature (sensitivity, value) and the volume of the information outsourced." My question to the minister is: what action, if any, has the ministry either already taken or is planning to take with respect to recommendation 13?

A few more matters, Mr. Chairman. How much time do I have left?

4:10

The Chair: Thirty seconds.

Dr. Pannu: Oh, 30 seconds. In that case, I think I'll conclude and sit down, and maybe the minister will respond to what I have said already. Perhaps I'll have another chance to make some more comments.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Don't worry that you just have 30 seconds left. I did send a note up to my staff to make sure that we set up some time to talk together on some of these issues because there's no way in this set amount of time that I'll even have a chance to answer everything raised.

You know, Mr. Chairman, it's said that the first 10 years of your life set you for the rest of your life, so I thank the member opposite for all that he had done for me in my first 10 years of life and for many, many of my friends that I grew up with in Whitecourt.

The Chair: Hon. minister, perhaps if we could get the ministerial conference in the corner to quiet down a bit, I'd be able to hear you better.

Please proceed.

Mr. VanderBurg: My batteries went dead in my hearing aid, so it doesn't matter anyway.

So I thank the member opposite for his questions. You know, you talked about the Utilities Consumer Advocate funding, and the increase is laid out very well on page 247 of the document. You're right: we have had an increase in our expenditures. In '05-06 Government Services moved to a single deputy minister as opposed to one for the department and one for the UCA.

The Chair: Hon. minister, if I could just interrupt one more time. The conversation that's going on there makes it very difficult to hear you. If you want to carry it on in the back room, that would be good. Please carry on.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you. Mr. Chairman, we had combined that to ensure the continued excellence in service. Operational responsibility for the UCA was moved to the assistant deputy minister of consumer services and land, who also acts as the assistant Utilities Consumer Advocate. The deputy minister within the government has more impact, authority, and ability to influence government policy and marketplace behaviour than an outside body. The minister already has a mandate to be the protector of the consumer, so the UCA role fits well within his portfolio, and you can be assured that I'll be taking great interest in this role.

It's important to increase the awareness of the UCA so that consumers become aware of the service available to assist them in making their energy choices if they choose to go that route and in dealing with their utility concerns. I've experienced within our constituency the very valuable role that the UCA can play when you do have utility concerns. When the UCA picks up the phone, like I said earlier, and calls the utility company with a concern, there's action. I will make a point of talking with our utility companies about how we can better interact and get better results for all Albertans when they do have a concern.

So it's important to make Albertans aware of this service. We've initiated steps to further advance this awareness. We're doing that by communication via our website and consumer information centre, so I'd ask the member opposite to take advantage of that website and give me your opinion on what you see. I need that feedback as well. We're going to make sure that there are speaking engagements by the advocate and staff, so if you have an area where there are utility concerns, contact me, and we'll make sure that we have an opportunity for the advocate and our staff to get out throughout Alberta and meet with consumers.

The Utilities Consumer Advisory Council has been throughout Alberta. I don't know if you've taken the time to go and attend one of those meetings, but those town hall meetings are very, very important, and we'll continue to do those.

I'll make myself available for media interviews on various topics, and I think you've seen me. I've only three or four weeks in action in this ministry, but I'm not afraid to attack consumer issues, and we'll do that. A full-time consumer and market communications manager will be involved with making sure that this does happen.

The UCA information materials, including a folder for plain energy language contracts, must be distributed to consumers when they sign the contract. I witnessed a lot of these contracts that were given to Albertans early on in the marketplace, and I'll tell you, you needed a Philadelphia lawyer to explain to you what it really said, plus you needed better glasses than I had to read the fine print on the back side. I don't think it's very smart on behalf of utility companies to offer a product like that to average Albertans. It's different if you're an Alberta Newsprint or a Millar Western, that I have in my constituency, that use a couple of million dollars a month worth

of energy. Well, they have people on staff to make sure they get the best deal, but our neighbours and our family sure don't have that opportunity. So that's where the UCA can play a very, very important role.

We're going to target marketing and advertising, and we'll include that in trade shows. All of us in our small communities have trade shows, and thousands of people walk through those trade shows. That one-to-one information, I think, is very, very valuable because you know yourself that you can take an ad out in the *Edmonton Journal* or the *Edmonton Sun*, and who knows who's reading it? But when you're out at one of our local trade fairs, you can directly talk to the people that walk by you each and every day.

The UCA has developed a protocol for co-operation among small consumer intervenor groups at regulatory proceedings of the EUB. By providing a protocol for review and consultation on regulatory issues, we've reached consensus on more issues, and we're improving the strength and effectiveness of all interventions while maximizing the return to the consumers. Mr. Chairman, you know how important that is at our homes each and every day that we get the best deal that we can.

The protocol has been included as part of a memorandum of understanding between the advocate and consumers' groups. A list of signatories include the AUMA – the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association – the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties, the Public Institution Consumers of Alberta, the Consumers' Coalition of Alberta, the Federation of Alberta Gas Co-ops, the Alberta Federation of REAs, and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, Alberta chapter. So we're working with those groups to make sure that Albertans are protected on the utility side.

4:20

The percentage of intervenors expressing satisfaction with the co-operative protocol utilized by the Utilities Consumer Advocate was dropped for the following reasons, and I've made some notes. The survey of intervenors, including parties outside of the signatories to the protocol, including industrial consumer organizations: these parties can oftentimes be at odds with positions taken on behalf of the small consumers. Given the very small population of intervenors and conflicting interests of some of the responders, this measure was not an accurate indicator of success. Accordingly, it's been dropped as a measure.

The member opposite also talked about the privacy of information, and maybe I can talk a little bit about that. I can assure you that protecting people's private information is one of government's top priorities, one of the ministry's top priorities, and one of my top priorities. So I agree that the two of us can work together to better provide that protection, and we'll set up a meeting very, very shortly to discuss those issues together. That's why we've introduced specific amendments to the Alberta Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, and that'll clarify the disclosure rules and increase penalties for violation, Mr. Chairman. For example, the amendments will clarify how the act applies to library collections of certain records of the internal auditor and ministries, and punitive fines have increased up to \$500,000 from a maximum of \$10,000 previously; \$500,000 new, \$10,000 old.

We are exploring other solutions together with other departments across government to address the potential for foreign authorities to view the private information of Albertans without proper authorization, including changing the language of our own contracts. This concern is nationwide, and we'll continue to work with other jurisdictions in a common approach to ensure that the issue is raised at a national level. I haven't been briefed on exactly when that'll

happen, but when that happens, when that opportunity exists for me to meet with other ministers across the nation that are dealing with this, I'll make sure that you get that information because I see how important this is to you.

This legislation establishes clear, concise, and common-sense rules for private-sector organizations that collect, use, and disclose personal information here in Alberta. All legislation is reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that it continues to meet the need as it was intended. We're looking forward to receiving feedback from business and the public on this important legislation, and from you, sir. The legislation review will commence on or before July of this year.

Consistent and effective management of all information assets across government, including electronic records such as e-mail: Albertans will be able to access the digital archives of governments in years to come just like they can access paper records at the Provincial Archives today.

So to the member through you, Mr. Chairman, we'll provide additional written information for you on those topics and look forward to our meeting in the next coming weeks.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to begin by commending the minister and his predecessor for the excellent service in the motor vehicle registries in the province of Alberta. Not only has there been a proliferation of locations at which one can obtain a licence, but the efficiency of those operations is highly commendable. Having said that, I want to raise to the minister's attention some concerns that I have and some particular data that I wish to bring to his attention as well relating to out-of-province vehicle registrations.

During the month of April 2006 the fine folks at the Calgary-Nose Hill constituency office conducted a small survey of licence plates in or near my constituency of Calgary-Nose Hill and northwest Calgary. We surveyed samples of 100 vehicles and counted how many vehicles were out-of-town licences. This was done during the third week of April. Transport and commercial vehicles were excluded from the survey, and the survey was repeated five times in a single day.

The results of those counts ranged from 3 per cent to 9 per cent out-of-province vehicles per hundred vehicles, which produced an average of 5.25 per cent of out-of-province licences on a total sample size of 500. A similar count was done on the QE II between Calgary and Olds with two samples of 100 vehicles, and the results were 5 per cent and 3 per cent, for an average of 4 per cent on a total sample size of 200.

As I said, the survey was done in late April, which is not a prime tourist month, and I'd venture to say that most of those vehicles were individuals who have moved into Alberta and, particularly in the case of Calgary, have moved there and chosen not to convert their licence plates within the mandatory 60-day period that our legislation provides. I suspect that many of those vehicles have failed to register because of (a) the out-of-province inspection requirements in our legislation and (b) the fact that they have cheaper public insurance available in the home provinces.

Now, based on the completely unscientific survey which we conducted and the total number of vehicles registered in the city of Calgary, which is 743,767, that would mean that roughly 39,000 out-of-province vehicles are driving through the streets of the city of Calgary alone. If that is so, at \$70 per licence this would translate into roughly \$2.7 million per year for one city alone in lost revenue. The concern is that this revenue is being lost to the maintenance of our roads and our infrastructure.

I believe that some sort of program ought to be co-ordinated in order to increase the compliance with the requirement to get Alberta licence plates once people move to the province. The question I guess I have for the minister is whether or not there are any statistics kept regarding the number of people that are moving into the province vis-à-vis the number of new vehicle registrations, because I assume that most of these people that are coming to the province come with their vehicles, and whether or not there is some way to do some calculations on the statistics with respect to compliance with the registration requirements under our legislation. Further, I'm wondering whether or not some sort of a selective enforcement program could be co-ordinated with the checkstop program or with some other program which the Solicitor General may be capable of conducting.

Those are my questions.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you for those comments, and I would say that most of them are comments. In my earlier discussions I had talked about the pressure on Alberta border to border: 65,000 people moving to this province. You know, we are going to face an increase of about 10 per cent in our registries in the upcoming year, and you know very well that once you become a permanent resident, you need to change your driver's licence; you're going to need to change your licence plates. I understand that even as early as last week, with the meetings between the Premiers of British Columbia and Alberta and other ministries, we will have some common work between our provinces on registries. Where that ends up, I don't know.

I can say that I haven't got any specific data that I have seen to date on how many Albertans are driving around with, you know, licence plates from other jurisdictions. I would say that in my community, Whitecourt, I probably experience the same kind of stats that you have. When we had our standing policy committees in Fort McMurray, I would say that it was even greater. But it all works out in the end, and I think that we're going to see those folks not only change their registration but, more than likely, make investments in Alberta, stay here because they're working here and they're finding that Alberta's a great place to work and live and play and raise their family.

So if there are some statistics that I can share with you, I will get those from the ministry and will pass them on, but I don't have anything at my fingertips that I can say will give you some solid evidence to back up your information.

4:30

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

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to express to the minister congratulations on his appointment. It's been refreshing listening to him this afternoon. The last time I met a minister of that calibre, I got fired. So I hope that doesn't happen to me in the House, told to sit down.

The first thing I'd like to ask the minister is if he could enlighten me if he has any views on drivers' licences for seniors. I have a constituent who's concerned about the cost of his licensing and the kind of bad press he gets, and he's kind of getting worried. He's of the vintage of over 75. So maybe I could get his views on that.

Also, I have another constituent – and I think I've filed the letter in the House – I don't know what his particular handicap is, but he has to renew his licence every year. I think it's the cost factor and also the doctor's inconvenience, yet I know the handicap causes him worry on his ability to continue driving. I was wondering if the good minister could share any insights he might have into that issue?

The one other issue is from a constituent, and he's a good Tory, by the way. He's a teacher who has problems with his fire insurance. He's tried to get help through Government Services and now is probably seeking legal advice. I was wondering if the good minister could identify someone in the department that I could refer this gentleman to talk to? He's a very good teacher in my constituency and is sincerely seeking advice and assistance.

So I'll leave those three concerns, and maybe he would comment on that for me.

Turning to the specific budget as such, on page 246, line 2.0.2, the estimate for consumer services is \$6.03 million, a very small increase of 4 per cent from the 2005-06 forecast. The Official Opposition continues to hear from Alberta consumers who complain that this government does not provide satisfactory services, yet you have only increased consumer services funding by 4 per cent. I guess the question to the minister is: can the minister tell us what he plans to do about better services for Albertans? He's kind of talked about that at various times this afternoon. How can this department improve its service to Albertans if the funding for consumer services is not increased? How can the minister justify giving his office, as it says here, a 31 per cent funding increase when consumer services is receiving only a 4 per cent increase?

Turning to the estimates on page 246, line 2.0.3, the estimate for land titles services is \$12.71 million, an increase of 6 per cent from the 2005-2006 budget. I think I heard it correctly from the minister there: all that deluge, I think, of 975,000 transactions. There has been an increasing awareness of the frequency of mortgage fraud in this province. Can the minister tell us if any of this increased funding for land titles services will be directed towards combating mortgage fraud? How exactly will this additional money be used given that the 2005-06 forecast for this line item indicates that land titles services overspent last year? I can certainly understand why from his earlier remarks. Is the minister confident that 6 per cent is sufficient for this year, based on the increase? What is the minister going to do to ensure that land titles services does not overspend again this year? It sounds like they're really, really, highly involved and have a heavy, heavy load to bear.

Then if I could just turn now to the strategic information technology services estimates on page 247, line 5.0.2., the estimates for the systems transformation of \$12.921 million, a 26 per cent increase from the 2005-06 forecast. There is a significant increase in funding here, Mr. Minister. Can the minister tell us why such a large increase for systems transformation was needed and how exactly he sees this additional money being used? Can the minister provide us with some details on the budget item?

The last one, Utilities Consumer Advocate. I'd just suggest to you, Mr. Minister, that on that particular issue if there's anything that you can do for education for my constituency of St. Albert, we would welcome certainly in September having a crew out to talk to us because we get a lot of concerns, and many times if we were better educated ourselves, we could do a better job of helping our constituents.

So with those comments – there are a few more, but I'll let my colleagues talk to them later. Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the Member for St. Albert for raising those issues. I'll ask you, Member for St. Albert: when you have a concern, don't file it in the House; give it to me. We'll make sure that your constituent gets taken care of. We've got some great staff, and they've got the ability to deal with those issues. So don't bother filing it in the

House. Let's deal with your constituents like I deal with mine. We take care of it right away.

The same with your constituent with the fire insurance issue: give me a note on that. Give me the particulars. I don't want that here in the House. We'll have someone within the department have a look at that. That's serving Albertans, and I make that commitment to you that our department will take care of your concerns or your constituents' concerns equally to that of mine or my colleagues' on this side of the House.

You talked about senior drivers. Well, I guess maybe in some areas they're getting a bad rap, and in some areas maybe we need to have a look at the way that we deal with some of our safety issues. I've had constituents come to me and say: "Please take away Dad's licence; we don't want him on the road." I say: "What are you doing about it? Are you going to the RCMP and saying that?" "No, we want you to. We don't want to be the bad guy." So I think Albertans need to take a little bit of responsibility on their own when they're faced with those issues.

I'll tell you, my father-in-law is 84 years old, and he's pretty sharp. I have no issues with him coming at me or at my family on the road, but there are young drivers that are coming at me and at my family down the road that I'm concerned about as well. So I don't know if I'm willing to say that I'm going to single out any specific age class. I think that we have mostly good drivers in this province, but we have some bad drivers. I've made a commitment to the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation to work with him on ensuring that all drivers are treated fairly but that we do something about the bad drivers on our roads.

Yes, you heard me earlier talk about the 975,000 increase that we've had at land titles, 975,000 files. Like I talked about earlier – and I'm not sure if you heard – you know, when I did a tour of just one of our offices and I asked them, "Normally, how many files do you deal with here in a day?" they said, "Well, six feet of files." Maybe the deputy can give me a thumbs-up. I think that was 4,000 land registries in the six feet. So in one day previous to my visit 12 feet came in: 8,000. Well, that's just not going to go away by magic. We have to deal with those files. We have to deal with them in a timely manner, and the staff has to have the tools to deal with that.

So we'll need to bring on some extra staff, and you'll hear me next year because I don't expect that the volumes that Albertans are faced with today will be any less next year. The growth here, in this city alone, and in your city is absolutely unbelievable, so we'll need some people to deal with those issues and those pressures. I won't apologize for coming here and asking for more dollars for staff to deal with increased pressures. If we don't have the increased pressure, we're not going to ask. I can guarantee you that.

4:40

A little bit on mortgage fraud. It's serious. You know, we talked earlier about identity theft, and with all this activity here in this province, there are some shysters moving to this province as well, and they're following the dollars that are generated. You asked me: what is Government Services doing about mortgage fraud? Well, Government Services established a special committee on this subject last year with representatives from government, law enforcement, and the financial, legal, and real estate communities, and the committee has made some recommendations which include developing best practices to help government and the real estate industry combat mortgage fraud. We're amending provincial laws to permit increased sharing of information related to mortgage fraud. We're raising the public awareness of mortgage fraud and the penalties for participating in such crimes. We have to nail these guys and nail them quickly.

The ministry is already acting on the committee's recommendations and has introduced amendments to the Land Titles Act and to the Real Estate Act in response to the committee's report. Proposed amendments to the Land Titles Act would give the registrar of land titles greater discretion in requesting additional proof of identification for a registrant and to refuse registration where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that a transaction is related to fraud. The proposed amendments to the Real Estate Act will clarify that the Real Estate Council of Alberta has the appropriate powers to investigate mortgage fraud and enhance their ability to share personal information about mortgage fraud and the perpetrators while respecting the privacy rights of individuals. We have to make sure that those rights are always respected in Government Services and the agencies that we work with.

Government Services provides a tipsheet on this matter. Again, like I talked about earlier, I challenge you to check out our website and look at the ability to get good information for consumers on that website. It's a great website. If you see deficiencies, let me know. We'll have our staff and our in-house people make sure that that's corrected.

The Real Estate Council of Alberta is becoming the first mortgage broker regulator in Canada that requires all licensed mortgage brokers and realtors in Alberta to complete a mandatory education course on mortgage fraud before renewing their licence. I think that's one of the pieces that you asked about: what are we doing about mortgage fraud? Well, that's what we're doing with our partners. The Canadian Institute of Mortgage Brokers and Lenders is developing a mortgage fraud red flag checklist for their 3,400 members. I think that goes a long ways to protect Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm very pleased to rise today to speak to the estimates of this department. I must commend the minister, who's a new minister, for becoming fully cognizant and fully grasping of his department in such a short period of time and looking to bring forward I think some very, very interesting and very timely and important things for the people of Alberta. Not to discount the previous minister, who I think has brought forward some interesting proposals in the department.

I am very interested in the landlord and tenants program that is coming forward, and I hope that that one will be pursued with vigour. I think that will hold some good potential to save money for the province, save time for our courts but, most importantly, will settle disputes in a quick and timely manner, and I've heard of many of them from constituents in my area of Edmonton-Manning.

Many of the areas that I would have liked to cover have actually been touched on already, but there are a few that I'd like to mention. This department is very important in terms of the nature of information and personal information that it deals with. One area that has become very much highlighted in the recent past is the problem with secure drivers' licences and the need to come up with something that will ensure that there is no fraud in this area, that there are no forgeries in this area, and that people are not using it in identity theft and all the rest of it, be they bikers, as mentioned earlier, or be they terrorists that might be using these identification pieces for much worse types of ends.

I see that the Canadian Bank Note Company has been given a multi-year contract to look to these secure drivers' licences. I guess a question arises as to how that was tendered. It is a private concern. What was the nature of the sourcing of it? Was it a sole-source contract? Was there any competitive tendering? Another question

that would arise is: will that be reviewed periodically? Another question that may arise from the work of the Canadian Bank Note Company is: exactly how long is their contract supposed to be going, or is it just something that will be renewed and renewed and renewed? What work is the Canadian Bank Note Company doing when they are actually visiting many of the registry offices on-site? What is the purpose and role of those visits?

On another topic, the minister mentioned that there is a lot of revenue coming out of this department, hundreds of millions of dollars. I read here \$284,494,000. Well, that's a lot of money. That's a lot of money. It's good to see that there is a surplus of revenue, but on the other hand I look at it as being tax and just another tax on hard-working Albertans. You know, looking at all the other revenue sources that we have for the government of Alberta, do we have to pull so much from these licensing fees and all the rest of it so that there are these types of actually very, very large revenues coming to the government in this area?

I understand that the minister said, for example, that we have a cost of a driver's licence which is 29 per cent below the national average. Well, you know, it's obvious that other jurisdictions are probably looking to this as a tax source as well. Maybe the whole idea across the country of using the fees or taxes that come from this source may be out of line, and Alberta could take the lead to simplify where our funding comes from and to take a look at this.

I know that a lot of words have been said about the increased access to registries and how that has made it more convenient. I think there was some feeling – and I'm just speaking anecdotally – that you could get better access in the years immediately after this was brought in. I'm beginning to see more and more lineups as I go to these places, and it seems to take more and more time. I wonder if they're being properly staffed, if we're seeing that these registries are putting proper training towards all of their people, and if in fact as the conventional oil industry pulls from all over, these registries are not in difficulty right now in getting people and that that is beginning to hurt service. To see a satisfaction level of 89 per cent sounds good, but if we're in this type of business, which is a retail level type of business, 1 in 9 is maybe not a very good percentage of people who are coming through the doors that leave with a lack of satisfaction.

4:50

Perhaps we're, you know, seeing a phenomenon that we're seeing right across many sectors in Alberta and something that the Canadian Federation of Independent Business identified in actually a very good survey, where they identified that I believe it was over two-thirds of businesses are having a problem keeping employees because of the fact that they don't think they can pay the rate to keep them and they're competing with the conventional oil and gas industry, which is able to pay much, much higher wages, salaries, and benefits. If we are seeing the wage rates in the registries much, much, much below and we start to see a drop even further in the satisfaction rate, I think it's something that the ministry should look at and see what may be done in this area. I had one report from a constituent who at one time, I guess, used to work for the government in this area. He said that the average wages are now about 68 per cent below what they were when they were actually with the government. It's astounding to see that the figure is that much.

The figure of 74 per cent satisfied with the access to government service in general is actually a very low figure. It should be much higher. I would hope that the department would look to very much try to improve that figure. Customer service to Alberta taxpayers, to Albertans is an important goal that I think we all must be looking to ensure is a high, high priority for our fellow citizens.

The Member for Edmonton-McClung asked me just to put forth a question on the FTEs, the full-time equivalents, and on the increase in the numbers of employees. Now, I know that the minister did mention that a little bit earlier, but I'd like a little bit more detail as to where these FTEs are actually going. Why the increase in employment? Which jobs will these people be doing, or for which roles in the ministry are these particular increases in employees going to be?

Another area was the issue – it was mentioned quite a bit earlier – of the Utilities Consumer Advocate. The awareness of the Utilities Consumer Advocate is not high in the population, with only 31 per cent of Albertans actually understanding that this important consumer advocate is there for them. There continue to be many people very interested in getting this type of service. To better publicize that and get it better known is I think something of great importance. I'd just like to ask the minister why it is the deputy minister that is taking that role. It seems to me that the deputy minister's role is something that is very much a full-time job in itself. This particular position could be one that certainly could see a much more focused effort by a single individual.

Other than the interest that I have in FOIP and the need to ensure that freedom of information and privacy are fully accessible, that concludes my comments. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you, and thank you for your interest in the landlords/tenants program. I think you would get a lot out of coming just a few blocks over and paying a visit to the office. It's also the same office that the Utilities Consumer Advocate is located in. I think you could probably learn something that you could pass on to your constituents, and if you're hearing of landlord/tenant disputes, maybe there would be some pamphlets or something there that you could pass on to your office.

You know, you raised the point about the office, and I'll make sure that we get enough information sent to each of our constituency offices throughout the province so that we have that information. Remember that it's a pilot project for the Edmonton area. Like I had stated earlier, I do expect that the pilot will be successful, and I do expect that this would be a way that we can save a lot of court time and Albertans a lot of money. So I would encourage you to take an hour out of your day when we get out of session to go over and have a look at the office, and if I'm here in Edmonton at the time, I'd like to go over there with you and hear your views on it.

Yes, we do generate some extra revenue and I think about \$300 million more than we spend, but, as you know, through our registries it's kind of like user-pay. The money that we have here transfers over to the minister in front of me, and he spends big bucks on rehab and restoration of our highways. So this is just a small way to contribute to those costs.

You talked about registry lineups or maybe specific problems. We have 225 registries that provide Albertans with a broad range of services, but if you're aware of a certain registry that's not providing the service to Albertans that they should be getting, I'd like you to make me aware of that. I'll have that discussion with my staff, and we'll let you know what will be done about that. We do want to ensure that Albertans receive service that's acceptable. You know, at certain times – it doesn't matter when – you can go to the Dairy Queen and hit a lineup of 20 people, but we have to make sure that that's not consistent. So if that is a concern in your constituency, I'd ask you to bring that to me, and we'll deal with those specifics. Of course, by doing that, you can help me get those satisfaction rates up.

You talked about the deputy also being the advocate. I'll tell you

that that shows you the talent that this man has. This guy can adapt to those concerns, and he's handling it. Until he tells me that he can't handle it, I think we'll just leave it alone.

The next topic that you talked about was FTEs. We really want to make sure that we justify that additional labour that Government Services brings on and that those folks that we bring on are actually providing services to Albertans. I did scratch down some notes that I can provide you on those FTEs. As I talked about earlier, we continue to experience increases in the volume of transactions. Land titles, for example, experiences increases of 7 per cent a year. That's quite an increase. I talked earlier with the other member about an increase of 975,000 transactions last year in land titles alone. That's huge. That's a huge volume. In the ministry we deal with 17 million transactions throughout Alberta, you know, five for each and every Albertan. That doesn't happen on its own. Those take some time; they take people, and I'm not afraid to say that we have the people to meet that challenge.

5:00

A key indicator such as housing starts is up 6.4 per cent in the first 11 months of 2005, issuance of building permits up 40.8 per cent, and the number of resale homes up 13 and a half per cent in the first 10 months of '05. As the economic forecast suggested, these trends will extend well into the future. That's what we're doing with FTEs.

I'll also tell the member that when I witness these volumes, this six feet a day increasing to 12 feet, those volumes aren't only for land transactions. Maybe you should have a look at your next assessed value of your house compared to when you bought it. There's a lot of equity that Albertans have built up in their homes, and I think that, you know, we're seeing a lot of these volumes through land registries. Because of that assessed value, people are saying: maybe I need to purchase something else, and maybe I'll use my home for equity because it's a cheap way at this time for financing. Also, too, that may bring expectations that Albertans may be biting off a little bit too much.

I've seen this happen before. I remember when my wife and I had our home mortgage. It came to time for renewal, but that was renewal at 19 and a half per cent. I was glad that the province of Alberta shielded me. At the time I was a supporter of the Alberta Treasury Branch, and they shielded that down to 14 per cent. We're not quite into that scenario, but I am concerned that Albertans may be taking new mortgages and second mortgages out on their homes to buy motor homes and cars. But all of that requires registration, and we deal with that. Those are choices that Albertans make, and we handle those choices well.

When we determine staffing levels, the ministry must also consider the lead time to train new recruits. As an example, to get a paralegal out of a university or a college and get them into our system, get them working, first of all you have to have an experienced person to train that person, so you take that experienced person away from what they're doing today to train a newer person. They just don't come into land registries as a paralegal and start dealing with those files. They need some lead time. It takes approximately two years for those land titles personnel to reach the desired level of expertise. This doesn't just happen overnight and by itself. It happens with a commitment that we have from our ministry and from the staff that we have.

I want to also talk a little bit about our staff. You know, I've just had three or four weeks to meet the staff in this ministry. I've had the opportunity to attend some recognition of those staff. We have people that have worked 40 years plus in government, you know. I was signing the staff recognition letters to congratulate them, and I can tell the member opposite that I don't remember a lot of the names of the staff, but I can remember the years of service.

I was so very, very proud to be associated with folks that have been with this ministry 40 years, 35 years, 30 years, 25 years, and then also to have the opportunity to meet those people and to meet those new people that are coming on board that are looking to these folks that have been with us 35 and 30 years to mentor them and to get them up to speed with the issues that we have in land registries. I'm very proud to be associated with folks that have that kind of commitment, and I think that alone should tell the members here in this Assembly about the dedication and the commitment that the ministry staff and everybody that I'm surrounded with has. I couldn't stand up here today and talk about the issues in Government Services if it wasn't for the great people that have surrounded me to get me up to speed with the issues in this ministry.

You also mentioned the issue of identity theft, and I can tell you that I take this seriously and that Government Services staff throughout our ministry will tackle this problem of identity theft. It's too bad that the crooks seem to be always one step ahead of all of us, but protecting people's private information has been designated as one of the top priorities in our three-year business plan. Again, that doesn't come just out of the sky. We have to put people and resources to attack that problem. We're going to work with other ministries to make sure that we have the right people doing the right work to make sure that we can tackle this issue and that we charge these folks, that we don't just identify it and do nothing with it. We have to make sure that these folks are charged.

Government Services has already developed fraud prevention materials for registry agents, introduced a new secure driver's licence, and introduced new privacy initiatives to help ensure that the personal information of Albertans remains secure. By leading the protecting people's private information initiative and assisting in developing policies, procedures, guidelines, and documents, Government Services will ensure that it as well as other ministries is providing appropriate protection to personal information in their custody or under their control.

I had an opportunity to witness, again on one of my short visits, that we have some special investigators working with the Solicitor General's department folks to make sure that when you provide identification to our registry agents – it may be for a new Albertan getting a driver's licence. That new Albertan will need to surrender their previous documents for us to go through and make sure that these documents are correct, that these documents that are being provided to us show the past record of driving experience. You know, I'm talking specifically about the graduated driver's licence. If you're from another country and you say, "Well, yes, I have a class 1, and I've driven for many, many years in my country," we're going to make sure that that experience actually has happened because you and every one of us want to make sure that those drivers of vehicles on our roads are licensed properly and have that proper experience and that they are well qualified to drive, especially the big trucks, up and down our highways.

I could go on and on about some of the issues that we are dealing with to tackle the problem of identity theft, but I think I can tell you – and I think you see the commitment that I have and our staff has – that we will tackle this. But I end with a question back to you. If you hear of these issues, if you see a problem in your neighbourhood or in your constituency or in your caucus, will you make me aware of this so we can deal with it head on? You know, don't table your document here in the House. Don't file it. Come to me. We'll deal with it, and we'll get those services for Albertans that they deserve.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mrs. Mather: Well, one of things that I've been thinking about is this identity fraud concern, and I think the hon. minister has answered and convinces me that he shares that concern.

5:10

The other issues: I guess the questions that I've had have mostly been answered. I want to also thank the minister for all of the answers that we've received because it indicates a real concern for Government Services.

One of the areas that I wanted to ask about and have on record is related to the number of employees that are going to be hired. Full-time equivalent employment for Government Services increased from 500 in 2005-2006 to 555 in 2006-2007. This is on page 253. I have been wondering: will these additional 55 employees be working in specific areas? Can you tell me what they will be doing and why there was a need to hire another 55 for the department? That was one of my questions.

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5), which provides for the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than 5:15 on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoons, I must now put the question after considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department for Government Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2007.

Agreed to:
Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases \$109,226,000

The Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I move that the committee rise and report the estimates for the Department of Government Services.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2007, for the following department.

Government Services: expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$109,226,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we now call it 5:30 and adjourn until 8 o'clock this evening, at which time we'll reconvene in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:15 p.m.]

