

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, May 16, 2007** **1:00 p.m.**
 Date: 07/05/16
 [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. Minister of Environment.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Her Excellency Elena Stefoi, ambassador of Romania. It was my pleasure to host the ambassador at lunch earlier today and to welcome her to Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, in 2006 Alberta's exports to Romania totalled more than \$10 million, mostly in agrifood products, pork, peat moss, and animal feed. Immigration from Romania to Alberta is increasing, with skilled workers accounting for the vast majority of new arrivals to our province.

I would ask that our honoured guest please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Knight: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me today to rise and introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly some students from the Rosedale Christian school in Crooked Creek, a very prestigious and important small school in my riding. There are seven youths and six adults accompanying them in a group. They're here today to tour the Legislature and to observe the functioning of the Legislative Assembly. They're in the members' gallery. I would ask them all to rise, please, and I'd ask my colleagues to give them the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed an honour to introduce to you and through you members of my staff. This is indeed a privilege because my staff have been deep in the hollows of the ministry working very hard lately and have come out today for second reading of Bill 26. I would like to introduce Bill Nugent and Steve Murphy of the legal services branch; Ron Cust, the director of the legislative projects branch; Steve White, the executive director of the assessment services branch. If I could ask this Assembly to give them the recognition that they so much deserve.

Thank you so much.

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

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To you and through you I'd like to introduce two very hard-working administrative assistants

within the transportation and civil engineering division of my ministry. Mona Koch and Jennifer Tate are joining us this afternoon in the members' gallery. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions today. First, it's my great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly three people who work for a very important organization in my constituency of Edmonton-Centre. Jerry Roantree is the volunteer co-ordinator of the St. Albert Help Society and is the president of the Alberta Association of Meals on Wheels Services, which represents more than 30 Meals on Wheels organizations in this province. With her today is Liz Tondou, who is the executive director of Meals on Wheels in Edmonton, in my constituency. Jim Draginda is the manager of marketing and fund development for Meals on Wheels and until last November was our outreach caseworker in Edmonton-Centre, and we miss him. The three of them are standing. I would ask you all to please give them a warm welcome.

Second, I'm really delighted to introduce to you Melody Cesar. Melody is going into her second year at the University of Alberta. She is studying psychology and political science, but what she really wants to do is go on and take a master's in speech pathology. She is already speaking four languages, she's working on her fifth, and she would like to put that particular talent of hers to good use in helping people in the speech pathology field. She's with the Edmonton-Centre constituency office for the summer as our STEP student. I would ask Melody to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege today to introduce to you and to the Assembly three members of the Marie Lake Air and Water Society and concerned citizens: Don Savard, Helen Parfitt, and Chris Goss. They're here because they want to raise concerns about Marie Lake and the fact that they're not getting answers to their questions and concerns from SRD.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly two members of the staff at the Palace Casino. Roxanne Draudson and Sheri Panas are both employees of the casino, and they have been on strike now for 250 days, due in part to the government's failure to provide fair and balanced labour legislation in our province. I would ask that they both please rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Members' Statements**

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

Camrose Kodiaks Hockey Team

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last night I attended the welcome home reception as the Camrose Kodiaks returned from the Royal Bank Cup, the national junior A hockey championships. Hundreds of billets and fans gathered to celebrate another outstanding season for the Kodiaks. After a division-leading season the

Kodiaks won the Alberta Junior Hockey League championships and went on to win the Alberta/B.C. Doyle Cup. This gave the opportunity for the Kodiaks to represent Camrose, Alberta, and British Columbia at the Royal Bank Cup.

Unfortunately, this was not Camrose's year at the national championships. The Kodiaks lost the semifinals to the host Prince George Spruce Kings in a record-breaking fifth overtime period. Despite the loss, the Camrose Kodiaks still took the opportunity last night to recognize their successes this season. A highlight of the evening was when team captain Brady Cook spoke about each of his teammates and the outstanding contributions each made to the overall success of the team.

The Kodiaks have developed a very successful junior hockey program. This June the team will honour all teams and players at a 10-year reunion celebration. In their short history the team has won the Alberta Junior Hockey League championship four times, the Doyle Cup four times, national champions in 2001, and were national silver medallists in 2003 and 2005. Part of that success is based on the team's ability to recruit high-quality players from across Alberta. This year's Kodiak roster had players from such places as Strathmore, St. Albert, Calgary, Edmonton, Cochrane, Ponoka, Sherwood Park, Spruce Grove, Rosalind, Hardisty, Viking, Daysland, and New Norway.

I want to salute head coach Boris Rybalka and assistant coaches Doug Fleck and Miles Walsh for another outstanding season. The team is also dependent on the strong support of their owners, the Camrose Sport Development Society, chaired by Barry Fossen. The Sport Development Society's purpose is to promote sport and recreation in the Camrose region. Congratulations for 10 years of the Camrose Kodiaks in my constituency and best wishes for continuing success.

Thank you.

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

Edmonton Meals on Wheels

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Earlier I introduced Jerry, Liz, and Jim from Edmonton Meals on Wheels, and now I would like to celebrate their organization. Since delivering their first meals in 1969, Meals on Wheels' dedicated volunteers have delivered thousands of meals to seniors and housebound individuals in the Edmonton community. Every day 400 to 500 meals are made and delivered which promote health and well-being for their clients. The organization continues to develop new menus and programs to serve the increasing diversity of dietary requirements and the diversity of the clients.

The Meals on Wheels program ensures that the clients can maintain independent lifestyles. Eighty-seven per cent of the people they serve are over the age of 70, and 82 per cent are living alone. People choose from monthly menus, and the service can accommodate diabetic, no-rice, no-pork, and no-fish diets as well as offering texture-modified meals, which some people require. The choice given to clients helps meet the needs of the growing population of seniors and others in our community.

1:10

The greatest strengths of the Edmonton Meals on Wheels program are seen in the dedicated volunteers, who give of their time to help provide nutritious, balanced meals to those in need. Volunteers are asked to dedicate three hours per week to the organization, and in return the volunteers have the rewarding experience of making a difference in their community. In many instances a volunteer may

be the only contact an individual has with others during the day. Volunteers come from all sectors of society: from high school and postsecondary students to parents and preschool kids to the retired and semiretired. In 2006 421 volunteers gave over 62,000 hours of their time to work in the kitchen, deliver meals, or help in administration. The service of these fabulous individuals is essential to the Meals on Wheels program. People receive not only meals from Meals on Wheels but also companionship and community.

Please join with me in recognizing the valuable and generous work done by the Edmonton Meals on Wheels programs and other Meals on Wheels programs in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Agrivalue Processing Business Incubator

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I had the privilege of attending the grand opening of Alberta's new Agrivalue Processing Business Incubator in the city of Leduc. This is a \$20 million investment in our agricultural sector. The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Food officially opened the incubator, and I had the chance to join him on a tour and even sampled some of the very delicious new products being developed at this facility. And I must say that I was truly impressed.

Mr. Speaker, this facility is state of the art and is Canada's first-ever incubator dedicated to supporting entrepreneurs and businesses in the food processing industry. Totalling some 74,000 square feet, it provides up to eight businesses with a private, fully serviced suite which they lease to grow their businesses in prior to launching out on their own premises. Staff from Agriculture and Food also work hand in hand with incubator clients to provide technical, marketing, and business support, service that goes above and beyond what is offered by other facilities.

Mr. Speaker, the incubator is also about encouraging and enhancing a value-added culture in our agriculture industry, something that is highly valued by our government. This centre will help get businesses and their new products and technologies ready for the marketplace. It would also bring new Alberta-grown and -produced products to grocery stores across the province and around the world.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate all the partners involved in the creation and operation of the incubator. It is a truly unique Alberta innovation that promotes our value-added industry and our province's can-do attitude. We should all be proud of this great facility.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Royalty Program

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers recently indicated that 33 of the 65 oil sands projects approved had reached the 25 per cent royalty payout phase. The list of projects that have reached this phase is not made public due to the provisions of the Mines and Minerals Act.

Financial statements from various oil sands projects do provide some information on the royalty status of some projects. The Canadian Oil Sands Trust 2006 fourth-quarter report reveals that their operation at the Syncrude joint venture shifted to the 25 per cent royalty payout phase in the second quarter of 2006. Canadian Oil Sands Trust ownership in Syncrude is 36 per cent. Crown royalties in 2006 amounted to 16 per cent in the third quarter and 13 per cent in the fourth quarter.

Nexen oil sands partnership owns a 7.23 per cent participating interest in the Syncrude joint venture. During the third quarter of 2006 Nexen paid a royalty of 11 per cent on its Syncrude production compared to a royalty rate of 23 per cent on its other Canadian oil production. Both Canadian Oil Sands Trust and Nexen are paying a lot less than the government-targeted range since their projects have achieved payout status.

These companies are following the rules made by this government. It is the government that is failing Albertans, who own the resource, when it does not collect a fair share in royalties. Albertans know that the royalty rate for oil sands projects after payout is far too generous when oil is selling at over \$70 Canadian per barrel. Albertans tell us that they are very frustrated that they don't get a break at the gas pump, but producers get a deep discount on royalties from a resource that Albertans themselves own.

Thank you.

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

Provincial Taxation

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Personal income tax and sales tax were introduced in Canada in 1917 as a temporary measure. Our current GST was introduced in 1991 in order to eliminate the deficit in federal budgets. We could go back through history and review all the different taxes government has imposed on their citizens – or should I say subjects? – and the dividing of nations and regions that has occurred, such taxes as the salt tax in India during Gandhi's passive resistance revolution, the Boston Tea Party, and here in Canada Papineau and his colleagues arrived at the House of Assembly dressed in homespun suits to boycott tariffs on imported English fabric. Might I say that the further the government is from the people, the more insatiable its appetite is for increased tax revenue?

We now have surplus budgets both federally and provincially, yet our local governments do not have sufficient funding to sustain their communities and are dependent on arbitrary provincial and federal grants to function. This is not in the best interest of our communities. It is time to turn the tide on taxation and put one in place, a revenue-sharing formula that municipalities can count on, one that is not arbitrary to the whims of government. A good start would be to return unconditionally 10 per cent of the personal and corporate tax to the municipalities where it was collected from. We could also return 10 per cent of other taxes on tourism, vehicle registration, and fuel, to start the list.

The report presented by the Minister's Council on Municipal Sustainability is a case of desperation on their part. Their request for new taxes is a direct attack on our families and communities and is the result of this government's faulty micromanagement and arbitrary grants. Municipalities have very limited ability for long-term planning or savings needed for capital expenditures. Taber's waste-water treatment plant is just one example.

Our formulas must change and their conditions. Mr. Speaker, new taxes are wrong and should not be added to the burden of families in our communities.

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

Police Week

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every day police across this province put their lives on the line to ensure that Albertans can live, work, and raise their families in a safe and secure community. These brave men and women face dangers and challenges few of us

ever encounter, and they do so with courage, dedication, and professionalism. The security and safety they provide is the backbone of our society and allows us to live freely with dignity and comfort.

Police Week, which runs from May 13 to 20, is a unique opportunity to recognize and thank police officers for the outstanding work they do to ensure that our streets and neighbourhoods are safe and secure. This special week also serves to remind Albertans of their own role in helping police do their work, and I encourage every Albertan to take a moment to think of how they can better support the work of police in their community. In fact, there are few better deterrents to crime than a strong community working in partnership with a dedicated police service.

Mr. Speaker, the work being done by police officers deserves our respect and support. During Police Week and every other week of the year all Albertans take great comfort in knowing that they can count on our police to keep them and their families safe. I am pleased to take this opportunity to thank police officers throughout Alberta for their dedication and commitment.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm continuing with the tabling of petitions dealing with the people who work with people with disabilities. This one today is from 262 Albertans from all over the province, and the petition is urging the government to make sure (1) that the pay is standardized across the sector regardless of where those employees are employed, (2) that they're fairly compensated and that the pay reflects the appreciation for their valuable service, (3) that we grant them access to professional development opportunities, and (4) that there has to be some province-wide service and outcome-focused level-of-care standards.

Thank you.

head: **Notices of Motions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 34(3.1) I wish to advise the Assembly that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places. I give notice that on Monday, May 28, 2007, Motion for a Return 4 will be dealt with. Additional motions for returns will stand and retain their places on the Order Paper.

head: **1:20 Tabling Returns and Reports**

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling a summary of the infrastructure and transportation priorities of the municipality of Jasper, the municipal district of Lesser Slave River, the village of Longview, the summer village of Norris Beach, the village of Sangudo, the town of Taber, the cities of St. Albert, Edmonton, and Calgary, which were either ignored, devalued, or dismissed during last night's budget debate.

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

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm rising this afternoon to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter from

a constituent, Tina Voss, who is writing with her concerns about the sign language interpreters program at Lakeland College in Sherwood Park and the fact that it has not been funded for this year. She doesn't want to have to go to B.C. to take that course.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling today. It's a letter dated May 15, 2007, from myself as chairman of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to all hon. Members of the Legislative Assembly, and it is regarding the appearance of deputy ministers before the Public Accounts Committee.

Thank you.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two letters to table today. One is from Susan Said, who is talking about the wage increases for daycare staff being "welcome news. However, let's not forget the many child care staff that work with children in the before and after school programs".

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

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to give two sets of tablings. One, a letter from Nicole Fedorak, the literacy intervention teacher at St. Philip Catholic elementary school, talking about the importance of the reading recovery program.

The second is the Workplace Respect Hand Book, which I got today from the Construction Owners Association of Alberta convention, which is meeting.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a tabling of a letter from Lori Mekechuk, who is an Edmonton-Mill Woods resident. "Income Support allows me \$545 to pay for rent and utilities. I am renting a condo from a private owner at \$800 per month and pay for all utilities. I have received a rent increase notice of \$400 per month." I'm asking you all to put yourselves in her place. Please, do something to help the situation.

head:

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Dr. Oberg, Minister of Finance, responses to Written Question 13 and Written Question 14 asked for by Mr. Miller on May 14, 2007.

head:

Oral Question Period

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

Affordable Housing

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The lack of affordable housing in Alberta is a big problem, and obviously every indication is that it's going to get worse. The CMHC predicts that vacancy rates, which are already dangerously low, will continue to fall and rents will continue to rise through this year and through next year as well. It predicts that few – few – of those new housing starts will be for

renters. My question is to the Premier. The Premier has boasted in here repeatedly about the number of new housing starts, implying that somehow supply is already catching up to demand. Could the Premier tell us how many of the new housing starts he describes are likely to be rental units?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, this question that the hon. leader is asking today came up in a scrum yesterday with one of the reporters. Again, I repeated our four-point plan: \$285 million going into affordable housing. It's followed up with legislation. There are also two safety nets there, for both rental subsidies and also for families, those that may not have a place to live. We're there to support those families to find appropriate accommodation, and we'll continue to do so.

Dr. Taft: The Premier is missing the point here. It's about rental units. That's where the crisis is. The government appoints a housing task force in February in a big rush. They hear from it in March. They ignore it in April. They stumble and fumble in May. Now they've assigned yet another committee to give them some more ideas in June. Who knows when actual decisions will be made on those ideas? My question again is to the Premier. Can the Premier tell us when this government's plan for affordable housing will be finalized, and when will it begin to reduce the pressures at that most intense point on the rental market?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, last week and again this week, quoting from Statistics Canada: of the 210,000 housing starts more than 25 per cent of those housing starts were in Alberta, with a population of 3.4 million. That is an unbelievable accomplishment for the province of Alberta. That's the kind of direction we have to keep going: building more housing units to take the pressure off those that are renting. Move into individual, free up space. That's the way it's done.

Dr. Taft: Sometimes it's like talking to a brick wall, Mr. Speaker.

The latest idea to be floated by the Premier, incentives to encourage developers to bring on new rental – rental – units, was proposed in the Alberta Liberal policy months ago, and I'm glad he's finally got around to reading it. He is certainly welcome to borrow more ideas, if he likes, from our policy.

Mr. Mason: And guess where they got theirs.

Dr. Taft: My question is to the Premier. Can the Premier tell us: when will this decision be made, and when will the new tax measures be implemented?

Mr. Stelmach: I think, Mr. Speaker, we've got a disagreement in the House as to whose housing policy I read. The NDs feel that it was in their policy first.

All I can say is that we're taking a new leadership role as a government. We're looking at different issues, and in fact during the campaign I talked about looking at some incentives because time and time again mayors and city councillors and those in the building construction industry came forward in terms of issues tied to taxes. Some of that has come forward. We're going to look at it, and maybe there's an opportunity to work here with the federal government to change some of those policies.

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

Free Vote on Temporary Rent Regulation

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Unlike the health minister a number of Conservative members of this government from Calgary aren't ready to dismiss the views of the overwhelming majority of their constituents who support temporary limits on rent increases. In fact, a number of the members opposite are joining with the Alberta Liberals and calling for this decision to be revisited. I'll tell you, Mr. Speaker, it's nice to see. My question is to the Premier. Will the Premier commit in the name of openness and accountability to bring a temporary rent increase cap back before this Assembly for a free vote?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, again, we have a plan in place in terms of affordable housing. All evidence that was brought to this House shows that the kind of plan that the Liberals brought forward would actually work in reverse. It would decrease the number of units built in the province of Alberta, actually exacerbate the problem even further, so we're not going to follow that path. Other provinces with a Liberal administration have, and guess what? They have actually decreased the number of homes and put people in an even more difficult position. So why would we want to follow something that hasn't worked?

Dr. Taft: The Premier claims he allowed a free vote on Bill 34, including the Alberta Liberal amendments that would have put in place a temporary cap on rent increases, but Tory MLAs who have publicly supported the idea did their duty and they toed the party line. My question again is to this Premier, who claims to want accountability and openness. Will he bring this issue back to this Assembly and allow a full free vote?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I can assure you that one thing I don't do is kick people out of my own caucus for speaking their mind.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You're welcome to have him, Mr. Premier.

The suggestion that every member of this Assembly felt truly free to represent the interests of their constituents on the issue of temporary rent caps simply is not credible. Can the Premier explain to this Assembly why he's dodging this issue and why he will not allow a free vote of his own government on this?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, putting \$285 million into affordable housing is not dodging an issue. It is a major, major contribution to the capital plan of the province of Alberta and will assist families in this province. Certainly, nobody is dodging any issue. This is the best plan available here for Albertans, and we're going to see a number of units built in the province of Alberta. I am confident it's going to work, our government is confident, and we'll see progress made in this particular area.

1:30

Municipal Planning

Dr. Taft: Well, Mr. Speaker, given their general approach to things, the fact that the confusion around the funding to Calgary continues to grow is no surprise. Now the minister of municipal affairs is flip-flopping on the position his government took one day, just one day, after meeting with the mayor of Calgary. One day he says that he will listen to Calgary's proposals, and the very next day he says that those proposals are off the table. It didn't take long for this Tory caucus to dismiss the city of Calgary. My question is to the Premier.

Can the Premier clear up the confusion that his government has created once and for all? What is the position of this government on unconditional sustainable funding to the city of Calgary?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I am disappointed that some people appear to want to divide Albertans and divide this great province, to pit one group of Albertans against the other. My responsibility as Premier of this province is to keep Alberta together as a province, to build for the future, to secure it. That's my responsibility and the responsibility of government. We will keep working with all municipalities so that we can find equitable funding for municipalities as they change and accommodate the massive growth that we're experiencing in this province. That's my strength, and I'll continue to work with all municipalities, not follow the leadership of the opposition to start dividing this province. That's not the Alberta way.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Of course, the same confusion that Calgary is facing is also facing the city of Edmonton and the capital region. The Premier stated yesterday that there is need for a stable planning regime for the capital region to protect investment, but he won't do what he says. He's not bringing in any solutions. Will the Premier clear up these mixed messages? Will he bring in mandatory regional planning for the Edmonton capital region?

Mr. Stelmach: First they're talking about unconditional grants, and then the next question is about doing something mandatory, you know, to make it a law. Make up your mind. What do you want to do?

I will take a leadership role, and this government will take a leadership role in the capital region, and we will work together with all municipalities to build a good long-term plan for development. It is unbelievable the kind of opportunities we have, and we need to have a good long-term plan for the future. We will get there. We will have one with co-operation, not using some big stick like he wants to use.

Dr. Taft: Well, things are falling apart, Mr. Premier. Things are falling apart on your side.

Regional planning in high-growth areas is critical right now to manage the challenges municipalities are facing. We need to ensure as a province that communities remain sustainable in the future, that environmental concerns are addressed in planning, that Albertans continue to enjoy a high quality of life. We need to plan for the future. To the Premier: does the Premier believe that the province has a duty to show leadership in the direction Alberta's future takes, or does this responsibility, in his view, rest entirely with the municipalities?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we have taken a leadership role. In fact, there is no jurisdiction in Canada that has put as much money on the table, \$1.4 billion, for municipalities. This is going to be sustainable. It's going to be predictable. It's going to allow municipalities to plan for the future. Like I said, with \$1.4 billion you would expect that we can find that co-operation between the government and all municipalities. Municipalities have different levels of assessment, different growth pressures, and we're going to work with everybody. The \$1.4 billion that's in the budget for municipalities is going to go a long way in building this long-term plan.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Affordable Housing

(continued)

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Instead of action to protect renters from being gouged today, the Premier's been telling us about the hundreds of millions of dollars he'll spend on housing to make up for years of Conservative neglect. While the Premier keeps reciting this mantra about all the new money he's spending, he conveniently forgets the fact that it takes between two and five years to build new units, during which renters are at the mercy of a broken market. My question is to the Premier. What will he do to help renters who are being hit with huge increases during the next two to five years?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, in the preamble the leader of the third party seemed to indicate that – what? – 11,000 people coming to the province in the first quarter of this year have chosen the wrong province to move to because there is no opportunity. There is no greater opportunity in the country of Canada than right here in the province of Alberta. We're working not only with new people moving in but with those Albertans that are here seeking their future, and we're going to continue to build on the plan that we have for affordable housing. Of course with respect to leadership, once the plan is put in place, we stick to it. We work with municipalities and the federal government to deal with this critical issue. We identified it many months ago, and we're working on it.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, you know, thousands of people are moving to this province in search of a better life, and many of them – many of them – are finding their dreams broken because they can't find housing that they can afford. Why is this Premier and this government failing to make sure that the opportunity is there for the people who want to come to this province? Why is this Premier following a hands-off policy that just breaks the dreams of thousands of people who would like to come to this province?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the reason that thousands of other Canadians – and this is 11,000 that migrated just from the other provinces to Alberta, not from other countries. The 11,000 people are here because there is opportunity. There is opportunity to raise their family, grow their family, retire here. Most importantly, there are jobs available here. If you look across Canada today, Alberta has had tremendous growth. We'll continue on our economic plan. That's what's attracting people to Alberta; it's jobs. They can't find jobs in their home province, so they're coming here. That's why they're here.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, a million Albertans live in rental accommodation, and the Premier's refusal to institute temporary rent guidelines and instead rely on programs that fund people who are short of money is going to force middle-class families onto the welfare roll. The fact is that instead of stopping the gougers, you would rather supplement them with tax dollars and force families into queuing up for government handouts. It's the Premier's vision that proud, working middle-class families should line up hat in hand

asking this government for cash so they can pay their landlord. Why?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, this government is caring and compassionate, and that's why we have in our budget built-in programs to support families that may on a temporary basis be displaced in finding accommodation when they move here to the province of Alberta. We'll continue with those programs in our budget because it is important to support those families that are seeking accommodation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Seniors' Housing Authorities

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Currently seniors' housing authorities are not authorized by the province to borrow from the Alberta Capital Finance Authority, and as a result municipalities are requested to borrow money on their behalf in order to access low-cost loan rates. This puts a burden on municipalities' borrowing limits, and many of them are near or at their limits already due to the growth pressures. My first question is to the Minister of Finance. Why are seniors' housing authorities not allowed to become shareholders in the Alberta Capital Finance Authority so they can access those low rates?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, through to the hon. member, what has happened up until this time is that the loans through the ACFA have been made to municipalities. Municipalities have then turned around and made the loan to the particular seniors' housing authority. That tends to be the practice today. The seniors' housing authorities are not shareholders in the ACFA.

Mr. Marz: Will the minister consider amending the Alberta Capital Finance Authority Act so that seniors' housing authorities are allowed to borrow directly?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again through to the hon. member, I think that's a great idea, and it's certainly something that we'll take into consideration and take a look at. Because of the huge growth that is occurring in the province of Alberta, we're seeing some municipalities that are reaching their limit, and we also know that there needs to be a significant amount of seniors' housing. So this may well be an area where we can simply save the taxpayer some money by not paying as much in interest costs.

Mr. Marz: My last question to the same minister: could the minister indicate when these changes may take place?

Dr. Oberg: Well, Mr. Speaker, obviously we are currently in budget deliberations at this point in time, so we cannot do it at this particular point, but I certainly will ask my departmental staff to take a very close look at this and determine whether or not we can. I think that this is a good alternative for seniors' housing, and it's something that we can take a look at from my department to help with this critical issue.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

1:40 Teachers' Unfunded Pension Liability

Mr. R. Miller: Mr. Speaker, on April 2 this Assembly unanimously passed Motion 503, urging the government to immediately initiate negotiations on options for a reasonable, long-term solution to the teachers' unfunded pension liability issue, yet six weeks later there's been no offer to sit down with teachers and begin the negotiations. My question is for the Premier. Is it now the policy of the Premier and his government to ignore the wishes of this Assembly by refusing to take action on Motion 503?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, within the next couple of days we'll be announcing the next steps in getting this issue off the ground. I will also be speaking to the Alberta Teachers' Association on Saturday, making the same announcement.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Six weeks later all that has been done so far is for the Education minister to send an incendiary letter to teachers designed to divide and conquer – and believe me, it has done that – a tactic well known to this government, and an offer made to teachers to sit at the table on yet another task force. We know what happens to task force reports in this province. They collect dust for 45 days, and then the government rejects 75 per cent of the recommendations. My question is for the Premier again. How can Alberta teachers and Alberta taxpayers, for that matter, have any confidence in this flawed process?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, what we have said is that we have committed to a long-term resolution to this issue. I have said consistently from day one that it won't happen quickly. It'll be fair, it'll be well thought out, and it will be in the best interests of both teachers and taxpayers.

There's no intent on this side of the House to do what that hon. member says. It's questions like his that are dividing and conquering.

Mr. R. Miller: Well, obviously, Mr. Speaker, he's not been speaking to teachers or the ATA, because that's exactly how they feel.

Mr. Speaker, the most recent letter from the Education minister reiterates the need to provide value to both Alberta teachers and taxpayers. My question is for the President of the Treasury Board. Will he admit that it's a fiscally responsible thing to do to pay down this unfunded liability now, when we have money available to do so, thereby saving taxpayers tens of billions of dollars in future payments?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, the Premier committed very early in his leadership campaign to address the issue of the unfunded teachers' pension liability, and he has the Minister of Education on track to have a responsible discussion about it. If the hon. member opposite thinks it's responsible for us to just cut a cheque for \$6 billion or \$7 billion and take that money from funding health care or funding education just to satisfy his urgency instead of taking some time, getting it right, getting in place a long-term, stable funding relationship with the teachers' union, that we support, then he's simply off base with financial reality.

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

Recruiting Foreign Workers

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The current labour shortage in Alberta has a significant impact on the manufacturing companies in my constituency and elsewhere in Alberta. It affects their ability to compete globally. A major company told me that they have been working closely with federal and provincial agencies to mitigate the labour shortages, but the results are slow. These challenges continue to impact their market share. They continue to recruit locally and internationally, but the results have been much less effective than expected. My question today is to the hon. Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry. What measures is your department taking to assist Alberta companies in this issue?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The new immigration agreement solidifies much of our partnership with the federal government. Our work with the local businesses, the businesses that are situated here in Alberta, identifies that there's very aggressive planning going in place for accommodating what we believe will be some 109,000 workers short in the next 10 years. On the international front we're working so that collectively with the federal government we develop a web portal to illustrate overseas what the requirements are and make sure that we have the opportunities clearly identified in other languages for people to know what they need in their credentialing. That with the PNP program will go a long way to addressing the issues.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the same hon. minister. In Alberta we have employment standards. In other government-controlled countries the export of human resources is sponsored and run by the government authorities. What measure do you use to ensure that the foreign workers from those countries are fairly treated and equitably compensated by their exporters?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, in the manner in which the question is posed, it would sound like we're looking at what we can do with other foreign governments. We don't have any control over foreign governments. What they do when they encourage workers to come here would be to make them available to companies that would look at locating here in Alberta. We don't force any regulation on foreign governments; however, we do make it clear that our government insists that these contracts be duly constituted, that those employers act under the terms of the Fair Trading Act here in Alberta, that it is a requirement that the employee does not have to pay to become part of this, and so on.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the same minister. Dealing with foreign countries is not easy. I have heard of fraud and illegal recruitment activity in the name of Albertan and Canadian needs for workers, such as setting up a fictitious recruitment service in another country to milk victims or offering to pay Albertan employers here to recruit particular individuals. Given that illegal and fraudulent activities in Canada are prosecuted by Canadian laws, what do you do, Minister, to prevent this from happening in other countries? It damages the high reputation of Alberta and Canada.

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, all employment agencies, all contracting firms must be licensed in Alberta. As I say, while we have no control over what happens overseas, those people that bring in workers here in Alberta must hold a valid licence. If workers have a perception or if people have accusations that people do not have those kinds of licensures, if in fact we get those kinds of reports, that is why in this year's budget we have some 72 additional workers identified to work on everything from employment standards to occupational health and safety. We are pleased to investigate and find out just exactly what the circumstances are.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Infrastructure Maintenance

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This May long weekend officially launches the summer recreational season. Thousands of Albertans will be travelling the highways and secondary roads in vehicles crammed to the ceiling or pulling trailers full of recreational equipment. Their greatest challenge won't be finding a camping spot; rather, it will be navigating Alberta's appalling roads. The recently released Infrastructure and Transportation business plan shows that the government intends for this province to have over 20 per cent of its highways deteriorate to a poorer condition within three years, with another 26 per cent only in fair condition. To the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation: why is this minister accepting this deterioration in the province's infrastructure?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, as we've been saying all along, we aren't accepting whatever. That's a true fact that we have way, way more traffic than we've had for years. Our roads are deteriorating. We've upped our budget. We've got \$18.3 billion in the capital plan budget over the next three years. We've only been rehabilitating about 400 kilometres a year. We're now going to do, in our business plan that we have right now, 2,500 kilometres over the next year. We've got two problems in Alberta. One is cost, and the other is capacity, and we're working on fixing both of those.

Mr. Chase: For too long this Tory government has casually neglected this province's infrastructure. The state of the roads is just one more example of this attitude. Albertans are now paying the price for the Tories' failure for over a decade to fund what was necessary for Albertans' well-being. Does the current minister accept that our decrepit infrastructure is a direct result of his government's past cuts?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, it's really interesting to hear them talk gloom and doom all the time, and the sky is falling. If you look at our past 10-year history, we've built an economy that's the envy of the world. In building that economy, that's why we have all the people wanting to come to this province.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Rising rents and rotten roads will be this short-term government's legacy. In his mandate letter from the Premier the minister was given the priority to "provide safe and secure communities." His homework assignment is repeated on every single government of Alberta press release. Government-sanctioned deterioration of provincial highways to over 1 in every 5 kilometres may well save the government money in the short term,

but it risks Albertans' lives. Why is the minister acting in direct contravention of his mandate to provide safe and secure communities?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, safety is one of the biggest mandates of this government. We take safety very, very seriously, and that's why we're working on a traffic safety plan that we're going to be releasing shortly. I myself really am concerned about safety on the roads, and I believe that we will increase that and make our roads safer as time goes by.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Municipal Taxation

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Canadian Taxpayers Federation recently released a study that indicates that Alberta families would pay about \$900 more a year in taxes if the province adopts the revenue-generating recommendations in the Minister's Council on Municipal Sustainability report. My question is for the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Where in the government process are these proposals, and when can we expect this huge tax increase?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I need to reiterate that those are recommendations of the minister's council. The minister's council recommendations have come to this government. We are in the process of going through the responses. We will then consult with municipalities about those responses, and hopefully we will have a final recommendation or a final response sometime late in the summer.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: would these proposed taxes be uniform, set levies that are in effect in all municipalities across Alberta, or will they create rich and poor councils?

The Speaker: A bit of a hypothesis there.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, I'm going to try, Mr. Speaker. I want to say to you that they are the choices of municipalities. As recommendation 9 states, individual municipalities can by option decide whether to utilize those taxes or not. So it is not a tax by this government; it is an option for municipalities to use a particular tax.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, for your records questions 5 and 6 are to the same minister. Will property taxes be reduced accordingly, or should Alberta families expect an increase in their overall tax bill?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is the choice of municipalities. Also, I want to say that the specifically named taxes were the amusement tax, tourism tax, property transfer tax, vehicle registration tax, split mill rate tax, and on and on. I want to say to you that it is the choice. If I read the recommendation right, it gives the opportunity – and I'll use the amusement tax – for a municipality to

have a tax on a ticket when they're building a venue such as a coliseum. That way it is more of a user-pay tax.*

Resource Development in Marie Lake Area

Mr. Bonko: Mr. Speaker, the development pace in Alberta is reaching unprecedented levels. In the Cold Lake region most of the land has already been subject to development, and the mineral rights have already been sold off. In the midst of all this development one shining jewel does stand out, that is Marie Lake. This pristine body of water remains virtually untouched, but if this government has its way, it'll become subject to intense seismic activity and potentially damaging underground oil sands recovery wells. To the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: why is this minister allowing intrusive, damaging seismic testing to occur that could have adverse effects on the aquatic life in the lake as well as, not to mention, danger to people who reside on the lake?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, of course, we haven't allowed any of this damage to take place that the hon. member alleges. He has to understand that the seismic stage of exploration is completely different from the exploration stage, two different processes, two different sets of hearings. But I'm happy to report that on April 19 we met with a group representing the Marie Lake cottage holders and interest holders. We discussed their concerns. We've subsequently met with the seismic company, and they're revising their plans to ensure that any testing that takes place is done in a safe and secure fashion.

Mr. Bonko: Mr. Speaker, residents of Marie Lake have questions, but they're not getting answers from this government, so we'll try for them. Section 40 of the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act requires an environmental impact assessment "to predict the environmental, social, economic and cultural consequences of a proposed activity and to assess plans to mitigate any adverse impacts resulting from the proposed activity." To the Minister of Environment: can the minister tell us if the required company is conducting seismic testing to fulfill the requirements of the EPA, and if not, why not?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, quite simply because at this point the project has not proceeded to the point that an EPA is required. The Minister of SRD has responded that the responsibility for the decision on seismic falls within his legislation. Should the company decide to proceed with the development of the project itself, then they will be required to conduct the environmental appeal hearing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over and over again people of Alberta have told us that they're not happy with the direction that this government is going. On affordable housing the government ignores people. On regional planning the government ignores people. Now we'll see if the government ignores the people of Marie Lake. To the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: section 54 of the Public Lands Act states that no one may do anything on public lands that affects watershed capacity or causes injury to any lake or body of water. We have been told that the minister has the evidence. Will the minister put an end to any proposed activity under or around Marie Lake?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I could just repeat what I said to the first answer. We're consulting with the residents of Marie Lake. We're working with the seismic company. There's been seismic done on any number of lakes previously in Alberta with no adverse effect. But I'll repeat what I said last month: before any seismic takes place there, I'll ensure that there'll be base monitoring ahead of time, monitoring during any seismic, post-seismic monitoring, and if there's any damage done, the company responsible will pay for all mitigation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Prescription Drug Coverage

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Canadian Institute for Health Information figures released yesterday show that annual prescription drug costs for an Alberta family of four are nearly \$3,000, of which the health care system paid barely 40 per cent. Alberta's drug spending is the third highest in Canada, and most of these rapidly escalating expenses are being off-loaded to families suffering illness. To the Premier: how can this government stand by and let Alberta families bear the brunt of these out-of-control drug costs?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, as Acting Minister of Health and Wellness I will take the question under due consideration, and I'm sure the minister will respond when he comes back.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplementary is again to the Premier. I think the Premier would be interested to know that statistics show that countries which cover the most drugs in the public system generally have the lowest drug costs. Here is just one example. In Belgium 77 per cent of all the drugs are paid for by the public system, but the cost of drugs for a family of four in Belgium is about \$1,200 lower than in Alberta. To the Premier: the NDP pharmaceutical savings plan could achieve real savings for Alberta families, but the government is ignoring these proposals and that fact and paying more. Why?

Ms Evans: Once again, Mr. Speaker, I'll be pleased to take this under consideration. I know that there's a very comprehensive pharmaceutical strategy that this government has been following, and I know that the minister would be pleased to respond in greater detail.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It would be good to see that strategy released.

Alberta public spending on drugs rose by 30 per cent over the last two years, years 2005 and 2006. Two years ago the NDP proposed an Alberta pharmaceutical savings agency to deal with these costs through bulk purchasing and other innovations. The health minister then praised the idea and said that elements of what was proposed were very appropriate. To the Premier: given this province's record as one of the biggest spenders on drugs, can you explain why the government has failed to do anything to bring down these costs of drugs?

2:00

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I would just respond in this fashion. I think there were incredibly parallel suggestions both from the Health and Wellness ministry at the time as well as from the third Alberta party, and I'm quite confident that when the pharmaceutical strategy is presented or when the minister comes back, the good ideas from this member of the opposition will be presented.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Incentives for Property Developers

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This week Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation announced that the vacancy rate for the city of Edmonton will drop to a 30-year low of .7 per cent this year because of the strong demand from newcomers and a shortage of new units entering the market. My questions are to the President of the Treasury Board and Minister of Service Alberta. What incentives are available for new apartments to be built, and will the government consider implementing new incentives for developers to increase the numbers of rental units?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, it is interesting that when the Conference Board of Canada identified that they were going to even get more shortages in housing, some would want to implement rent control that would obviously make the problem much worse. Probably one of the greatest incentives we've done as a province is make sure that people know that when they come and invest in Alberta, they'll be treated fairly, and there will be no arbitrary grabbing of the value of their property. One of the things, rather than even new incentives, when I met with the advisory board was that some of the taxation policies that are in place now are counter-productive to rental properties, whether it be municipal taxation levels or federal ability to depreciate and reinvest. So we have to work with our partners.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. My next question is to the Minister of Finance. Will the government consider implementing tax incentives for builders of new apartment buildings or for owners of existing apartment buildings?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, certainly, there are some issues when it comes to taxation for rental property owners. If we were to do, for example, what the United States does: when a rental property owner sells a rental property, as long as they purchase another one within 180 days, they pay no federal sales tax on the new property. So there are certainly things that we can do. We need to do it in conjunction with both the municipality, especially when it comes to their property taxes on multifamily dwellings, and when it comes to the federal government, on the capital gains side as well as to our rental side. So we certainly will take a look. I'm not making the hon. member any promises in this question, but it's certainly something that we're open to at any time.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. My last question is to the minister of municipal affairs. What incentives is the government providing to encourage the development of affordable housing in general in the province?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, the first incentive is providing \$211 million to municipalities for them to have the decision-making on how they believe housing should be built in their areas, also the encouragement of having secondary suites coming on to the market to increase units. In the last two years with \$100 million this government has initiated 3,700 units to be built or in the process of being built.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Teachers' Salary Negotiations

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This Minister of Education has made it clear that his overall strategy in salary negotiations is to ensure that Alberta teachers will be bullied into paying the price of prosperity. Last year inflation in Alberta was 5.5, and earnings in the private sector grew to 4.3, yet the operational funding for school boards increased by only 3 per cent. This amounts to an effective budget cut. In a year when over 80 per cent of Alberta teachers will be renewing their contracts, the Minister of Education clearly expects teachers to swallow a pay cut. To the Minister of Education I have one simple question. Do you feel that teachers deserve wage increases that match those in the private sector and keep up with the cost of living in Alberta?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, the facts are this. We spent \$5.6 billion on education this year in our budget, 95 per cent of which flows to school boards. That's a 5.2 per cent increase over last year. School boards have an accumulated surplus of some \$220 million. So between a 5.2 per cent increase and \$220 million there is plenty of room to negotiate reasonable contracts.

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

Mr. Flaherty: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In a letter written last month, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing informed municipalities that the province would be increasing its take of the municipal property tax by 5.5 per cent. The minister explained that this proportion will keep up with the real growth in this province. To the Minister of Education: why does your department take into account actual inflation only sometimes, sir, like when its own revenues are at stake, but not where operational funding or teachers' salaries are concerned?

Mr. Liepert: Let me repeat. Our budget went up 5.2 per cent. We have a \$220 million accumulated surplus with school boards. There is plenty of room to negotiate reasonable contracts between school districts and local ATAs.

Mr. Flaherty: Well, last week in his exchange with the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmarr the Minister of Education implied that salary negotiations will go smoothly because many school boards have accumulated surpluses that put them in good financial position to negotiate. To the Minister of Education: do you expect school boards like the Battle River region, which had an accumulated operating surplus of \$8.5 million last year, to use this money to fund teachers' salary increases? Is that what you're saying, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can only repeat what I've said on at least three or four occasions in this House. It is up to the local school boards to negotiate with the local ATA. I would just simply say that we've had several settlements in the last two months that were retroactive for the year we just came through where teachers at the local level settled for roughly 3 per cent. So the hon. member can do what he likes in terms of trying to inflame the negotiation process that's about to get under way. I have a great deal of confidence in the school boards and the ATA locals that they will come to agreements.

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

Bear Encounters

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With the long weekend finally approaching, Albertans will be enjoying recreational activities throughout the province. I've heard concerns, though, about the threat that bears pose to hikers and campers. Friends of Isabelle Dube, who was killed by a bear by Canmore in 2005, have created a website to warn hikers of the location of bears and are urging the government to create a better bear warning system for hikers and bikers. My question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Does the government have any plans to implement such a warning system?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow for that question and use this opportunity to extend our condolences to the husband, family, and friends of Ms Dube. Her tragic death reminds us of the dangers inherent in bear/human encounters in the backcountry, but that's why our government has a series of policies designed precisely to keep our hikers, bikers, and campers safe when they're in bear country.

Ms DeLong: My first supplemental to the same minister: does the government plan to put up a website that would allow the public to post bear sightings, as requested by this group?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I won't say no now, but we're going to proceed with caution on that idea. We're concerned that a website might give a false sense of security to some people that there are no bears in the area. It's well known that bears can travel long distances in a short period of time, so there's a lack of reliability. Also, there's a curiosity factor. If there was a website, say, and there's a bear over here, there's the possibility that teenagers or tourists or maybe even the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore will run up there to try to count the bears. So we're going to proceed with caution.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much. To the same minister: then are there any other precautions that the government is taking to protect campers and hikers?

2:10

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, yes. The government, as I said, has a spectrum of programs designed to promote safety. Our BearSmart program emphasizes education for hikers, campers, and tourists, how to avoid bear encounters. We also in known areas of human activity remove the berry bushes that attract the bears. We also have these new Karelian dogs, that are very popular around the province, that

chase the bears off. If there's a dead animal around that's a known source of food for a bear, we put up signs and close the trail. Finally, as a matter of last resort relocation is a possibility for a problem bear.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, followed by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Provincial Olympic Co-ordinator

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Responding to the Bob Maskell scandal the Premier stated: "I can assure you that under my leadership perception of this sort will not happen." The perception of Mark Norris's potential appointment as an Olympic ambassador is very bad given Mr. Norris's support of the Premier in his leadership bid. My question is to the Minister of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture. Has the minister consulted the Premier on Mr. Norris's potential appointment in light of the Premier's assurances in this House just last month?

Mr. Goudreau: Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly at this stage the question that the hon. member is asking is pure speculation. However, I need to say that in response to the invitation from Premier Campbell our Premier requested that my ministry lead the development of an accord with the organization committee for the Olympics to be set for 2010, and we're looking at that aspect.

Mr. Agnihotri: To the same minister: who else is being considered for this position: former athletes, people who are actively involved in amateur sports, anyone other than top Tories?

Mr. Goudreau: Well, Mr. Speaker, we truly believe that Albertans need to be engaged in the spirit of the Olympics. We believe that there's a role for enhanced tourist opportunities amongst the western provinces. We also believe that there is a lot to be done in the recreational areas and that the cultural opportunities are there. We're trying to devise systems whereby we can encourage all Albertans to take advantage of that.

Mr. Agnihotri: So that means Mr. Norris is going to receive a gold medal, right?

Mr. Speaker, now that the Premier has awarded all of his supporters in the leadership campaign with prime appointments, will this government begin to reward people based on ability rather than political favours?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, the co-ordinator's or ambassador's role is only one of the initiatives that is being considered at this time, and there has been absolutely no decision at this date as to who might be leading those initiatives for the province of Alberta.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, so far that has been 90 questions.

Does the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing wish to supplement an answer?

Mr. Danyluk: Yes.

The Speaker: Well, if so, then the hon. member to whom the answer is being supplemented has an opportunity to raise an additional question.

Mr. Danyluk: Not a problem.

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

Rev. Abbott: Agreed.

The Speaker: Then please proceed with your supplement.

Municipal Taxation
(continued)

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to make sure that there was clarity in one of my answers, that answer being in regard to the approval process of the minister's council report. That minister's council report is before this government, and there has been no approval of the taxation that has been requested or that has been recommended by the minister's council.*

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, you have the opportunity for a supplemental if you choose.

Rev. Abbott: Well, I'm just wondering, Mr. Speaker, then, I guess, if the minister could be a little more specific in his timelines and if he has allowed municipalities to give further input on this proposal.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I said before, this process is in front of the government right now. Once this process takes place and we look at some responses, I will take it back to municipalities and to the minister's council and hopefully have a final recommendation by the end of summer.

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Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading

Bill 26

Municipal Government Amendment Act, 2007

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure for me to rise today and move second reading of Bill 26.

The Municipal Government Act authorizes the operations of the municipal authorities and therefore affects the vast majority of Albertans. To improve the act, government is proposing some amendments for discussion and approval by the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 26, the Municipal Government Amendment Act, 2007, will alter the legislation in a number of ways. I'll take a bit of time to explain what the amendments actually are intended to do. The proposed amendments involve the ability of a minister to make guidelines concerning the standards and procedures for assessment of property, the financial cost to municipalities incurring compensation claims relating to the effects of public works projects, and minor housekeeping for a name change to Infrastructure and Transportation.

I will now provide you with more detail on each of these amendments individually. An amendment to section 322 is needed to confirm and clarify the minister's authority to set the standards and procedures contained in the minister's guidelines for preparing annual property assessments. This is a procedural amendment to incorporate the substance of the minister's guidelines regulation AR 246/2006 in the act.

This has been done as a response to technical legal challenges made to the Municipal Government Board and the courts about the

validity of the minister's guidelines. The guidelines set out instructions, procedures, and validate standards for annual assessment that have been in use since 1995. The guidelines are often updated to respond to the changing economic conditions. This flexibility is needed to ensure timely updates and communication to municipal assessors. As a result, this proposed amendment exempts the guidelines from being filed under the Regulations Act. In order to confirm the validity of all existing minister's guidelines, the amendment includes a retroactive provision.

Lastly, the amendment includes a requirement that a notice of establishment of guidelines be published in the *Alberta Gazette*. This includes information about where copies of the guidelines are available for review. The current practice is to publish the guidelines through the Queen's Printer and make them available on the government's website.

Overall, the proposed amendments protect the public interest by ensuring that municipalities have a stable and predictable property assessment base to raise municipal revenues, continuing to defend current provincial assessment policies, including the validity of the property taxes levied under these policies and procedures, and ensuring that relevant documents are available and easily found.

In addition, an amendment to section 534 is needed to provide protection to municipalities. More often, municipalities are faced with compensation claims in relation to the effects of public works projects. This is of particular significance to those municipalities experiencing rapid growth. Concerns have been raised that compensation claims are becoming unduly costly and that the scope of such claims is at times going beyond what was intended. The proposals clarify and in some cases limit the circumstances under which a claim can be made. Specifically, a requirement that there is a permanent reduction to the market value of land is now emphasized. As well, the use of the clarification term "abuts" rather than "adjacent" is proposed in relation to the geographic circumstance under which compensation may be considered.

2:20

Also, to ensure procedural fairness, the amendment provides that the municipalities publish a notice of completion of the public works in a local paper as well as issuing such notices to every affected landowner. This is in concert with the requirement that landowners submit the claim for compensation within 60 days. Instructions are given regarding the resolution of claims which could not be agreed upon between parties. This involves an option of binding arbitration, an appeal to the Court of Appeal for a decision of the Land Compensation Board.

Lastly, these amendments provide authority for the minister to make regulations respecting the practice and procedures before the Land Compensation Board. As well, a scope of the order of costs is included in the amendments.

Overall, these amendments will assist in protecting the municipality against an award of compensation that may be excessive and may impact the construction of public works. The ministry has met with officials from the city of Edmonton on several occasions since the summer of 2006 regarding acceptable amendments. A minor matter of the name change from Infrastructure to Infrastructure and Transportation is also included in this amendment.

Mr. Speaker, it is important to emphasize that the proposals have been developed in consultation with Alberta's representatives of local governments through the Minister's Council on Municipal Sustainability and targeted stakeholders affected by the public works projects. The overall result is that municipal authorities will be better able to continue providing the high quality of service that Albertans have come to expect. The bill is part of the government's

responsiveness to the needs of Alberta municipalities and clarifies certain property assessment provisions and defines the scope of compensation claims related to public works projects.

I ask the consideration of this House to give approval to Bill 26, and I would ask to adjourn discussion. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order. While the members are bringing in their staff, I'd just like to go over some of the rules. We're still breaking new ground on some of our new Standing Orders, and this is the first day of cross-ministry where more than one party gets to ask questions during the course of the debate. So what we will do is there will be 10 minutes of questions, followed by 10 minutes of answers by a minister. If more than one minister wants to answer or supplement a question, they have to do so within that 10-minute time frame. They won't each get 10 minutes before we go back to the members wanting to ask a question.

I also have a request from the Official Opposition asking if they could start off with questions instead of a statement from the ministries. Is that correct?

Ms Pastoor: Yes, it is.

The Chair: Would you like to just briefly speak to it?

Ms Pastoor: In consultation with the minister we've decided that we'll try it with him first but that on another one perhaps we could switch it. So I'm fine.

While I'm standing, could I have a request? We're going to divide our 10 minutes into five. Can you time us for five?

The Chair: We could do that.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. Most appreciated.

The Chair: So five for one speaker and five for another? Is that what you're saying?

Ms Pastoor: Yeah, from our side.

The Chair: Is everyone in agreement with that?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay.

If there are any changes that either side would like during the course of the days to come as we go through this, if you could discuss between the House leaders prior to coming in, it would be helpful.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. Thank you for the request, and I'm sure the House leaders will be consulting. This is an historic opportunity, and we were hoping that this particular exchange in the cross-ministries would have perhaps less of the adversarial nature that one often finds in the regular ministry budget debates. It was meant to be much more of a collaborative effort in investigating how the

ministries are working together on issues that cross over more than one ministry. So off we launch on our experiment, and thank you very much for your wise advice and oversight of this particular experiment.

The Chair: It is also a bit confusing if the minister is going to start with 10 minutes, the first 10 minutes for the government side. Which minister would like to proceed first? The hon. minister of seniors? I'll recognize the hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Could I ask a question? Actually, since this is new as well in format, if we have to speak from our own chairs, given that we've got three ministries and you have a lot of staff – we just coincidentally all happen to be right in the same spot, so functionally it doesn't work quite as well. I appreciate what that means, and we'll live around it.

The Chair: According to the Standing Orders a member can only be recognized from his seat. It would require unanimous consent to waive the Standing Orders in this instance. We can't do it in committee.

Mr. Melchin: You can't do it committee?

The Chair: We can't waive the Standing Orders in committee. The staff can sit wherever there's an empty seat. I recognize the situation with the particular ministries all being close together, but we'll have to do the best we can do. There are seats in the back.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on this point.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. Thank you. For clarification from the table officers: would it have been possible for us, prior to coming into committee, to request unanimous consent to do it when we were in committee, to have members not be required to be at their seat? In other words, could we have prearranged it? We don't need an answer now. Perhaps you can send it to me in writing once you have it, but just for future encounters it might be helpful to know.

Thank you.

The Chair: We'll get a clarification on that.

In the meantime, if we could start. I'm going to recognize the hon. minister of seniors.

Mr. Melchin: I'd like to further clarify that all of our ministers are close in communication and in work, so whether we are physically close in seats or in our objectives, it's all the same to us. We're delighted to have many of the staff from all of our departments here because we're a very unified, close-knit group anyway. This will work for us, and we will accommodate.

Children's Services

Education

Seniors and Community Supports

Mr. Melchin: Good afternoon to everybody. This being our first cross-ministry in Committee of Supply, I'm going to speak on behalf of my colleagues the Minister of Education and the Minister of Children's Services for opening remarks. To see if we can condense, though, we will use the time and respond to our own individual questions.

2:30

The topic today, vulnerable Albertans, certainly is one of critical importance to all of our ministries represented here today. While the

specific issues that we work to address may be different for our various departments, there are vital links between the programs that we offer, and we certainly have very common commitments to helping Albertans on this topic in particular. Certainly, I would say that there's a strong connection between today's topic and one of Premier Stelmach's priorities of improving Albertans' quality of life.

I'll begin with the Ministry of Seniors and Community Supports, whose focus is on providing assistance and protection to vulnerable Albertans. Our budget this year of about \$1.8 billion is just under a 10 per cent increase from last year's forecast. Two core businesses: providing targeted financial assistance to seniors and people with disabilities and, secondly, planning, providing, and co-ordinating supports and services to help seniors and people with disabilities that live in the community.

In this year's budget we received funding to address the pressures of our growing and aging population and to take steps to improve programs to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of Albertans they serve. One example is the increase to the AISH program, in particular the inflation-proofing of the \$50 increase to \$1,050 being one of the acknowledgments of that that we've done over the last three years.

We're carrying forward about \$10 million from last year to develop pilot projects in providing services to help clients work. We've increased our investment in persons with developmental disabilities programs, and this will help us address the workforce issues that are facing this sector. Funding has been provided to assist with agency staff recruitment, retention, and remuneration pressures. That being said, with our economy and challenges, creative innovations go beyond just money, and we are looking very much towards some creative ideas to provide services given that there's been a 90 per cent increase in the funding of PDD since 1999 while caseloads only grew about 20 per cent in that same period.

The ministry is committed to providing vulnerable Albertans with quality programs and services, and we are looking and will continue to look for ways to serve them better.

I'll introduce now those of my department that are here: Tim Wiles, deputy minister; Dave Arsenault, assistant deputy minister for community support programs and strategic planning division; Reegan McCullough, assistant deputy minister, disability supports division; Chi Loo, assistant deputy minister, seniors services division; Susan McCulloch, senior financial officer, corporate finance. I'll let the other ministers in due course introduce their staff when they have a chance to respond, in light of the time.

On behalf of the Minister of Children's Services I'd like now to briefly touch just on a few of the many ways that Children's Services is protecting and assisting a very important group of vulnerable Albertans: our children. Children's Services' program expense this year is \$972 million, an increase of \$68 million, or 7 and a half per cent. This includes \$750 million for child intervention services, which helps some of Alberta's most vulnerable children. The ministry's work includes both preventative services, that help families before they reach a crisis, and protection services, when a family is unable or unwilling to provide a child with a safe environment.

Everyone here today knows that government ministries must work together to ensure that children and other vulnerable people get the help they need. That is why there is an increasing emphasis on cross-ministry work. For example, child and family services authorities work closely with Seniors and Community Supports to help youth who are turning 18 transition to services available through persons with developmental disabilities or AISH.

Here in Edmonton the joint action committee for children brings staff from school boards, health authorities, and the Edmonton

CFSA together to find ways to improve service delivery. There is a policy in place to ensure that complex cases are reviewed and kids who are struggling in school get the extra help that they need. In Red Deer the health authority, the school district, and CFSA came together to deliver an integrated program for children who are struggling because of emotional, behavioural, or psychological problems. It only makes sense that the efforts of various ministries are co-ordinated to achieve the best results for the child, the family, and the taxpayer.

A similar philosophy is at work when it comes to the government's action to prevent bullying and family violence, decrease the number of aboriginal youth who take their own lives, and reduce the impact of fetal alcohol syndrome disorder. Those are just a few examples where several ministries are working together to help children, youth, and families. I'll allow the minister to introduce her staff at the appropriate time.

On behalf of the Ministry of Education Children's Services works closely with their ministry to help the needs of youth as they transition into adulthood. They also work closely with the Ministry of Education, speaking of the Ministry of Children's Services, another key player providing assistance to vulnerable Albertans.

Just touching on a few programs of Alberta Education, Alberta Education through its leadership and work with stakeholders provides all students enrolled in our kindergarten to grade 12 education system with a high-quality education. It is about ensuring that students are prepared for the next stages of their lives no matter what their abilities are. School jurisdictions receive funding through a flexible funding framework, which allows for local decision-making in the best interests of their children and students.

Alberta Education's budget for the fiscal year 2007-08 includes many examples of these supports for students. For example, funding for the student health initiative will increase from \$41.7 million to \$44.2 million, an increase of 2 and a half million dollars, or 6 per cent. As well, the department provides funding for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students to assist boards in providing programs and services for aboriginal students and children. These are just two of the many examples of supports in place for our children and students.

With those comments we look forward to entertaining any of the questions you might have as applicable to our various ministries. Thank you.

The Chair: Before recognizing the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, I do have a clarification on the request to have the ministers change seats. The cameras that are recording us and broadcasting through the Internet are programmed to the individual minister's seat, so the request cannot be accommodated.

With that, the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. Heaven forbid we'd miss our TV time.

Thank you very much for those opening remarks and for getting in under your 10-minute time frame. My interest, I believe, is probably more on the process side, and I think that's what I'll be talking to today, as I think some of my other colleagues will as well, which is sort of less confrontational, just the process of how we can make this a little bit better. I do subscribe to the KISS concept, but I spell it with only one S: keep it simple. I've noticed in my constituency office, of course, when people come in and they have a problem that appears to be simple to begin with, by the time they've dealt with two or three ministries, it becomes very, very convoluted. So I believe that's what we are here to discuss in some fashion today.

The government provides disability support programs for people with disabilities up to age 18 – I believe the minister has already

alluded to this – but more often these supports are provided through Children’s Services and Education for schools, teacher, and students. But at 18 the programs and the services for the people with disabilities become fragmented and often unco-ordinated. People must navigate through different departments and organizations to receive information, advice, and support for employment or training, postsecondary support, housing, income support, and medical support among many other things. It’s compounded by the fact that there are often gaps in these services. What I have noticed with some of my experience is that the information that comes from the different ministries doesn’t always jibe, so that’s even more confusing.

The second transition point where Albertans with disabilities often encounter difficulties occurs at age 65, when people with disabilities must transition between provincial support programs like AISH and the federal programs like the Canada pension plan disability pension. This fragmentation of delivery often results in program and policy inconsistencies, wide variations in services and supports, unnecessary bureaucracy and expense, and the lack of co-ordination across the programs’ regions and the organizations.

On pages 8 and 29 of the government’s strategic business plan one of the strategies to improve quality of life is to improve supports and services for persons with disabilities through better co-ordination and integration. So to the minister of seniors: has caucus or cabinet discussed how to streamline services to Albertans with disabilities to ensure that they have easy access to required supports so that they have the opportunity to be fully participating citizens?

2:40

Questions to the same minister. Albertans with disabilities struggle to find their way through a maze of services. What action has the government taken over the past six months to address the differences, and has the government considered consolidating disability services for children, adults, and seniors under one department? Alternatively, has the government considered implementing navigators of some sort to help people with disabilities and their families navigate the many different community agencies and government departments to access the services that they need?

One of the things I might point out is that the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry has said that her department has hired extra people not only to help the investigation part of it but to help people through their services. So it has been done in at least one ministry.

The Alberta Brain Injury Network uses connected service co-ordinators to assist Albertans with brain injuries and their families to access supports from various programs and community resources. Is this something that the minister might consider for adults with physical and developmental disabilities?

To the Minister of Education: in what specific ways has the minister been co-ordinating with the Minister of Children’s Services to ensure that supports for children with disabilities are sufficient and appropriate? Has the minister met with any disability groups or parent groups to receive feedback on the success of current disability support programs for the schools, the teachers, and the students? I believe that my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods has brought up autism over the last week. It’s a huge issue in this particular area.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods for the second five minutes.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you very much. I just think that it’s essential for us not to see children’s needs in isolation, so I’m very pleased

with this process today where we can see the ministries not as being separate but looking at common interests.

I do want to focus on autism now. Family support for children with disabilities received a \$6.7 million budget increase for total funding of \$101.8 million, which is a 6.5 per cent increase. That’s from estimates, page 64, line 2.0.2. This will not be sufficient to meet the needs of children with disabilities in this province. In particular, I have strong reason to believe that this government has actively underestimated the level of need for services from children with disabilities by categorically denying access to services. The experiences of children with autistic spectrum disorder highlight this pattern, and I have been speaking about it recently in the House.

Autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disorder that affects thousands of Albertans. High-quality, specialized services and intensive intervention can dramatically improve the quality of life of children with autism and their families. Really, we’re talking about the difference between a child with autism becoming an independent adult and someone who will remain in institutions for the rest of their life.

Children’s Services uses multidisciplinary teams to assess children with autism for eligibility for government services. This process seems to be fraught with problems, and parents consistently complain about involvement in the process, that there seems to be random decision-making, neglect of regulations, and no consistency that they can see. To the Minister of Children’s Services: how much funding for specialized services is requested by parents with autistic children each year, and what per cent is actually granted? Then I’m wondering: how much of the funding for FSCD actually reaches families, and how much is spent on administration? How much funding is spent on costs associated with the appeal at the MDT process rather than actual purchase of services? It seems to me that the MDT process has become very convoluted and confusing for families. I’m wondering: what is it costing us, and are we really getting the value that we want?

Ms Blakeman: Speak out the acronyms.

Mrs. Mather: Multidisciplinary teams?

Several parents have explained to me how each year they’re forced to enter a costly and prolonged battle to appeal the decision of the multidisciplinary teams. Will the Minister of Children’s Services consider creating an advocate or ombudsman for parents who have children with autism and feel that they have been treated unfairly by the system? To the Minister of Children’s Services: what is the value in forcing children with autism to prove each year that they deserve access to services? We know that this is lifelong, almost a sentence, yet these families have to go back each year hat in hand and say: my child deserves these services. Will they ever enjoy stable, predictable funding?

To the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports: what specialized services are provided to adults with autism? Do you distinguish between people with autism and other developmental diseases? Are there any special funds dedicated to adults with autism?

To the Minister of Children’s Services: I have been inundated with concerns from parents of children with autism over the multidisciplinary team process, the regulations that are being ignored, and an overall lack of transparency in information available for parents desperate to know what is going on. Will you commit part of your budget or discretionary spending to undertaking a review that identifies and corrects problems related to the fairness of this process? I think it not only has to be seen to be fair or perceived to be fair; it must indeed be fair. We have many questions indicating that perhaps it’s not at this time.

The Chair: Does the hon. Minister of Education wish to respond?

Mr. Liepert: I'll try and respond to some of the questions relative to education, and then I believe the other two ministers would supplement. Before I do that, I'd like to ensure that I introduce to the House my deputy minister, Keray Henke. I have no other officials in the House.

I want to try and come back to a couple of the questions that were raised earlier relative to meeting with the disability groups. One of the things that I have attempted to do in travelling the province and meeting with school boards and parent councils is: some of those parents have children with various disabilities, and we've spent a fair bit of time discussing, in many cases, their own particular issue but also a broader issue. It is a very difficult situation. There's a parent with a child that has severe disabilities. I guess we have to determine from our standpoint what appropriate funding is. We fund for a child somewhere in the range of \$16,000 per year for severe disabilities. Is it enough? I've heard from parents that it's not enough.

I've heard from other parents, however, that were very thankful for our programs. In fact, I was at a function just a week or so ago where a parent came up to me and said that he and many others have relocated to Alberta because of our special-needs programs in education. So it really does vary across the province.

There were questions relative to co-ordination. It could always be better. I think one of the departments that's not here today is health, and that is clearly one of those, I think, the fourth department, that co-ordination has to take place with. Relative to what's called PUF funding, when our funding expires or is used to the maximum, family and community services then kicks in to take on some of that funding. So that is one of the ways that we have the interdepartmental cross-ministry work.

I think that might cover it just for now. I'll turn it over to the Minister of Children's Services to answer a couple of questions, and I'll see if there were some that I missed.

2:50

Ms Tarchuk: Actually, I'll make a few comments regarding the first set of questions that were asked about co-ordination mostly between Education and Children's Services. Just so you know, with our family supports for children with disabilities, which we know, and it has been mentioned that that's a zero to 18 age group programming, we do start transition talks at the age of 16, sometimes younger. Those discussions engage parents in the transition planning. The worker and the family discuss future needs of the youth and services that might be available if needed, and that would include public guardianship, income support such as AISH, and PDD services for those who meet eligibility criteria.

Another important point that's worth mentioning is that we are currently planning a cross-ministry protocol to make transition planning across the province consistent. It will help ensure better youth transitioning to adulthood. And Children's Services will be working with PDD as part of the Ministry of Seniors and Community Supports to promote co-ordination based on the protocol.

Just a couple of other points that I'd like to highlight. One is the disability link phone. We continue to operate a toll-free telephone line in Alberta. It's available to families anywhere to obtain information about disability services and what is available in their geographic area.

Actually, the last point on those transitional questions would be just to let you know that Children's Services, Education, Seniors and Community Supports, and Health and Wellness have developed a joint brochure, which will soon be released, if I'm not mistaken, I

think in the next couple of months. That will provide for Albertans all the services that are funded by the government of Alberta for preschool children and special needs.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you. As with all of these, if we miss something, we'll endeavour to follow that up in writing.

I want to introduce, actually, two other individuals that I didn't have in my speaking notes: Jim Menzies, executive director, finance and IT services, who is here on behalf of Dave Arsenault; and Bruce West, director of supportive living, long-term care development branch.

With respect to programs once you're 18, a child turning 18 and having the support services that you need, we do have a transition protocol that's been developed in working with childhood to adult. There have been a number of departments that have helped develop this: Children's Services; International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations; Advanced Education and Technology; Education; Solicitor General and Public Security; Employment, Immigration and Industry; Health and Wellness; and Alberta Mental Health Board.

The transition protocol is basically a guide to help youths and their parents get the information they need when they need it so they can make the best decisions possible. Families can use the protocol to learn how to access supports and services available after youths and disabled turn 18 and throughout their lives. The protocol addresses all areas of transition to adulthood, including – and I think it's important to note the supports and services available after the age of 18 – education, employment programs and opportunities, living arrangements, community life, financial independence, relationships, social and leisure, health care, and medical management. So it's very extensive. Whether it's been fully known and available: I guess that will be the ongoing challenge, to make sure that all of the children are aware as they're becoming an adult of this protocol precisely for that reason, because there are multiple programs that affect and impact the lives of adults. How would they become better educated and facilitated? That is the design and direction of that protocol: to help them.

With respect to seniors, on the other hand, and the transition from an adult to an older adult, we do work with the AISH clients starting at about six months before they turn 65. That's more to help them identify the benefit structures that are available through the seniors' programs. Those seniors' programs are not specifically designed for a program such as autism per se. They are programs that would be generally available to seniors, so they would be eligible for the seniors' benefit or a special-needs assistant or dental and optical. They can access Alberta Aids to Daily Living. And that would be part of our working with those AISH clients before they become a senior so that they'd be aware of the range of programs and services that are available to seniors.

As to the federal programs, I'm not a hundred per cent certain how to answer that. I guess we can follow that up. There are a range of federal programs as well, and making people aware of those – because that's part of our seniors' benefit that is very closely tied into the assistance of the federal programs. I imagine that linkages are there; if not, we'll follow up otherwise.

A couple of other areas. I thought we should talk about fragmentation of programs. It is true that persons with development disabilities have a range of programs that are available, so there's some degree of, I guess, fragmentation because there is such a range. Yet one point I would mention is that the design has been to make programs fit more the needs of the person rather than to have a uniform program. That requires a range of service providers.

You have, obviously, your intake people to help address that. You've got a different availability of service providers in each region, so you're taking advantage of the programs that are available and the expertise that would be available locally, sometimes of the family supports. Really, you tailor those to fit more, making sure that individuals' needs are met, and that will cause some fragmentation. It causes some problems, but it offers an enormous amount of benefit too. That doesn't mean you get the program right, and that's the ongoing challenge, I guess: assessing the need. But we do hear just that, because there is a whole range of programs that are provided, and I think it's a good question as to how, then, do you assess that you've appropriately met and . . . [Mr. Melchin's speaking time expired]

We'll follow up with the rest of the others.

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

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that. I'll be talking about the supports for children with disabilities. Both the ministries of Education and Children's Services have some responsibility to ensure that children with special needs have the support necessary to be healthy and successful. Goal 1 of the Ministry of Education is to ensure high-quality learning opportunities for all by ensuring that children and youth at risk have their needs addressed through effective programs and supports. Strategy 1.3 of the Ministry of Children's Services is to enhance cross-sector capacity to respond to the needs of children and youth with special and complex needs and their families by improving coordination and access to services and supports.

As children get older, the services available to them and the department that administers them changes. Some parents of children with disabilities feel that they are shuffled from ministry to ministry and are somewhat confused about the services that are delivered. They are really never sure of who's responsible for what, so let me just pose two or three questions. Will the government make available information about services for children with disabilities from a single and easily accessible source? That's one question that I have.

The second question is: will the government take concrete steps to ensure that parental involvement is encouraged in services and programming for children with disabilities? Will the departments of Education and Children's Services make a concrete effort to work together to ensure that the division of responsibilities for children with disabilities does not result in confusion or inability to receive services?

School boards receive funding for supports for children with special needs based on how they are coded, which can lead to some students' being overlooked. Actually, tomorrow I have a recommendation I'll bring up in the budget for Education on that. That seems to be supported by something I received from a pool of superintendents this afternoon. Now I forget where I am, so let's just try and pose this question: has the government done any comprehensive reviews to ensure that school boards are confident that student needs are met through this system?

3:00

One of the programs that I really believe has received a lot of support and a lot of parents are very supportive of is program unit funding. I'm talking about Education now, but if you can help me, I think Children's Services is involved, and Health is involved in that as well. Maybe I'm wrong. Anyway, what I'm saying is that it's very specialized support for children with severe disabilities up to the age of 5, but after that the funding is no longer available. I

think this program is so successful that – and I've got this from one of the superintendents in the region of the province where I live. I live, by the way, in the St. Albert constituency.

I was going to bring this tomorrow, but I think it fits here. He was saying to me in this brief paper that he gave that program unit funding was not extended – and this is in this year's budget; I want to make sure that I'm saying it for this year – to at least grade 3. The programming for special needs children, therefore, cannot be sustained beyond kindergarten, and a learning disability is magnified as a child progresses through grades 1 to 12.

I was talking to him this morning, and he was suggesting that to me. I don't know if you have the data about this with these children that are exposed to PUF, but there's about 20 to 25 per cent of the school population that starts in grade 1 that misses PUF, doesn't get exposed to it. He's asking clearly in his suggestion to me – and I've talked about this, I think, with the deputy at times – that PUF be extended to grade 3. Again, I think it's so essential that kids get a good start. I think even the minister believes that.

And you talk to people at the University of Alberta. They're doing some key research. I don't want to use names because they would be upset with me. It might cut their government grant off. But I think there is something to this. I think that a lot of kids that are not screened properly at grade 1 – we miss them – don't start school well. I think there's something we could do there, and I think that down the line it would cut off a lot of these kids that are turning away from school and not doing well later on in school. I think there's a whole challenge there.

So I'm really trying to say to you people that PUF to me is a good program, and I'm trying to urge you to expand it. Take a look at those achievement tests and bury them, and use that for children that start in grades 1 to 3, and do some remedial work with them. I think you'd receive so much praise that people would vote for you again probably. Who knows?

Anyway, now, the next thing I'm going to talk about is supports for children abusing drugs, and this is one . . .

Ms Blakeman: You're over.

Mr. Flaherty: I'm over? I'm dead?

Ms Blakeman: You're over. You're triumphant.

Mr. Flaherty: I'm triumphantly shot down.

Ms Blakeman: You are triumphant.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you very much. God bless. Even my own colleagues are turning against me. I was just getting started.

The Chair: Edmonton-Mill Woods for the remainder of the time.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you. I want to support what my colleague from St. Albert is saying about the need for early intervention and the wonderful success of the PUF programming and that it really, truly does need to be extended because if we can help children at the earlier years in learning to make good decisions, positive decisions, and in feeling competent and that they actually can achieve, we might not have so many making poor decisions, such as abusing drugs, and that's what I would like to focus on now.

Many children who are using drugs seem to fall through the cracks in the system. Unfortunately, the cracks do go beyond Children's Services and Education, health through AADAC, and Justice because they all have a role to play in keeping children safe, healthy,

and drug free. Page 16 of the government's strategic business plan indicates that a focus over the next three years is to support the healthy development of children and youth by developing "collaborative health, social and learning programs and services that ensure children and youth will be well cared for, safe, healthy and successful at learning."

To the Minister of Children's Services: how has the minister been collaborating with the ministers of Education and Health to support healthy, drug-free children? I'm wondering what strategies the minister has developed in consultation with the ministers of Education and Health to implement drug education and prevention programs among Alberta's youth. Are we looking at an expansion of the concept of the DARE program there, which starts in elementary? I'm hearing from parents that they need a DARE program to help them understand their drug-addicted children or to help prevent their children making those bad decisions by recognizing the symptoms ahead of time.

Page 29 of the government strategic business plan outlines Children's Services goal to

continue to build collaborative partnerships on initiatives such as Prevention of Family Violence and Bullying, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, Integrated Crime Reduction Strategy and the Community Spirit Program . . . and engage in collaborative decision-making as it relates to providing better outcomes for children, youth and families.

This is really admirable. I'm wondering, to the Minister of Children's Services: which stakeholders, interests groups, or agencies does the minister plan to collaborate with in order to meet this goal, and has the minister considered the link between family violence and bullying and drug use among children?

The Children's Services business plan notes that over a lifetime each individual with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder "will need about \$1 million to \$1.5 million in special care and support services" involving the justice, health, and education systems, to name a few. Again to the Minister of Children's Services: what collaborative initiatives is the minister currently working on with the minister of health to prevent or address FASD? I think I should include the Minister of Education there. Has the minister been working with the minister of health to determine how many youth drug treatment beds are truly required?

To the Minister of Education: has the minister considered making drug counselling and education services in schools more widely available? Of course, for that to happen, we would have to have more school counsellors. I'm talking about trained school counsellors, individuals who have got the university training required to assist with some very difficult and complex issues. Does the minister believe that counselling services currently available in schools are sufficient? What role does the minister see himself having in the effort to reduce drug use among youth? More co-ordination is required between the school system and social agencies when it comes to youth drug use. What steps is the minister taking to improve the relationship between schools and social agencies? What kind of continuum can we have there in terms of services? Can we have these people talking with each other?

The Edmonton Prostitution Awareness and Action Foundation notes that the average age of someone pulled into prostitution is 14 and also attributes the increased number of prostitutes to the availability of cheap crystal meth.

The Chair: Does the hon. Minister of Children's Services wish to respond?

Ms Tarchuk: Well, thank you. First of all, I will commit to making sure that we have full answers to all of your questions, but I'm going to back up and talk a little bit about FSCD and also autism.

But, first, I actually need to introduce who's with me today on the floor. We have Gord Johnston, ADM; Deputy Minister Maria David-Evans; and Niki Wosnack, ADM. Up in the gallery we have Mark Hattori, acting ADM; Neris Havelock, executive assistant; and Sheryl Fricke, ADM. Thank you.

Okay. Just a couple of comments. To go back to the FSCD, I just want to refer to a couple of things that I think will be of interest to our members. First of all, I said a couple of days ago that I think that we're very lucky to live in a province that feels strongly that families that are dealing with and living with children with challenges deserve our support. Without a doubt, our FSCD program is one of the best in Canada. We hear that quite often. We have a number of other provinces that are interested and on an ongoing basis take an interest in what we're doing here. I don't know that any other program offers the wide range of services that we do, and the hon. member was right that this year we looked at just under a 7 per cent increase, raising that budget to \$102 million.

All of the services that are under FSCD are based on each child's individual assessed needs. The program offers referral, co-ordination supports, respite, aide services, counselling, extraordinary child care, assistance with costs of medical appointment supports, health-related supports, and the list goes on and on. I know that at one point you had asked: when will there be consistency? I guess the simple answer to that is: we continually assess the children that access that program because we want to deliver exactly what their needs are. That is an ongoing service.

I thought that this is quite telling, actually two things telling. Eighty-seven per cent of the families surveyed in 2006 have said that the problem has had a real positive impact on their family, and that's quite a positive result, for sure. The other thing that's interesting is that prior to 2004 – okay, all of our decisions that are made under that program you do have the ability to appeal – there were close to 200 appeals. In 2004-05 there were 115 appeals. In 2005-06 there were 35 appeals. In '06-07 the number of appeals decreased to 22. So I guess I'd also say that that is something worth noting.

3:10

I also want to just refer quickly to the MDTs that you referred to, the multidisciplinary teams. To ensure that children with severe disabilities receive the most appropriate supports and services, an MDT assessment is required. They involve a review of the information provided by the child's family, service providers involved with the child, as well as the medical and assessment information that is available from various professionals in the field. It's important to note that the MDT does not diagnose the child but makes recommendations about the type and the level of specialized services.

I know that you asked some very detailed questions, and we'll get to that in terms of the costs of that. What I can tell you is: I do know that we will be enhancing the number of MD teams, multidisciplinary teams, to help with both workloads and consistency.

Then, if I can just switch over, I'm glad that you brought up the FASD. You know, we know that FASD is a long-term disability that is totally, totally preventable. I know that you're aware that in this year's budget we have \$4 million to start the 10-year fetal alcohol syndrome strategy, and you've raised some good questions about that. The details on the strategy we probably will be rolling out in about a month and a half. So some of that will answer your specific questions. But I can tell you that the plan is focusing on enhancing and developing programs in seven areas: awareness and prevention, assessment and diagnosis, supports for individuals and caregivers, training and education, strategic planning, research and evaluation, and stakeholder engagement. Again, as soon as we have the details, I will share that with you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Education to supplement?

Mr. Liepert: Yeah. I'll make a couple of comments. The member for St. Albert talked about coding. I guess that one of the things that has always sort of bothered me in this portfolio is the fact that we have to code kids. Somehow, there just has to be a better way of doing it. I don't have the answer, but I do think there has to be a better way of doing it. One of the things we are doing this year is a comprehensive review of the entire coding system. Hopefully we can come up with something that might be a little more appealing, and any suggestions the hon. members have would be welcome.

A lot was mentioned about PUF funding and about extending it through to grade 3. I don't dispute what the hon. member says. I guess it really comes down to a question of funding and how much you can apply in any one year. But it should be noted that many of the students who are on PUF funding up to grade 1, some \$23,000 per year, then qualify for the \$16,000 special-needs allocation on top of the per student grant. So when you add the two together, it's very similar to the PUF funding. It's just delivered in a different way.

The one thing that we are also attempting to do in conjunction with Alberta Health and Wellness is to ensure that we – we've got a couple of pilot projects under way relative to more comprehensive screening. Again, it's a word that has some connotations that may cause some concern. We haven't necessarily come up with a better word yet. We want to ensure that the children and their needs are identified at a very early age and then are treated accordingly.

Just a couple of comments relative to school counselling to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. We have to remember that it's not the Department of Education that delivers the education to students; it's really the school boards around the province. There are varying needs by school boards based sometimes on geography, sometimes on just demographics of the school. I know that a fair number of them have moved towards counselling and drug counselors. I mean, I've been to schools where there is full-time policing with a dog in the school. I would like to ensure that it's the school boards at the local level making the decision literally on a per-school basis relative to those needs.

I think that answers the questions that were asked.

The Chair: Are there no other responses from the government side? Then I'll recognize the hon. Member for St. Albert again.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd just like to compliment the minister on looking at the coding system. I have that as one of the issues from the superintendents, and I think that he's right on. Unfortunately, I don't think I have many answers for him, but it's a difficult one. It might be something that we could talk about privately because I think you're right on with that.

The next part. Both the Department of Education and the Ministry of Children's Services have stated goals of keeping children safe and from harm. Strategy 1.7 of the Ministry of Education is to "continue to foster a safe and caring school environment through . . . effective behavioural supports" and strategy. I would just like to comment on that. I think of the minister once in a while in my prayers. I've reluctantly not brought up the question about security in question period because I think it's an explosive issue, and I haven't wanted to bring it in the House in that sense.

I think the whole question there of safe and caring schools is a very, very important thing. What I worry about – and maybe it's because I have grandchildren, and I know you take it seriously, Mr. Minister – is that I don't know what is enough. I don't know what the boundaries are on that. I hope I'm not being negative here, but it concerns me as a human being. Some of the things I see when I

visit schools sometimes even frighten me a bit. That's the whole bully syndrome. We get into a number of things there. I know you're sensitive to that, and I hope I never bring it up in an inappropriate place, but I hope that you're thinking of this. Maybe there's something we can do. Maybe it's a question of education. I don't know the answer there, sir.

The Ministry of Children's Services is to strengthen the provision of strategic leadership to cross-ministry work that supports children and youth in becoming caring, contributing, and self-reliant citizens. That brings me to a question here. Will the departments of Education and Children's Services work together to ensure that school boards have adequate funding to provide counselling services in schools? I think the minister has already touched on that this afternoon.

Strategy 3.4 of the Ministry of Education's business plan is to "collaborate with other government ministries, stakeholders, regional authorities and the community on initiatives to support children and youth." My question is: what partnerships has the ministry developed to create programming or curriculum in Alberta schools to prevent and address drug addiction? I go to the ceremonies in St. Albert in my constituency on the DARE program. I think it's extended now. Maybe the deputy could help bring me up to date. I think the DARE program is extended further into junior high, into grade 8 I think, this year. Certainly, in St. Albert it has.

I think it is a marvellous program, and from what I see, it's doing some wonderful things. I think there's a lot more you can do, but we are supplementing a lot of things the family used to do. The time that I spent with my father in the Shuswap Lakes and building an old rustic boathouse and learning that the Indian chief could come over and help us do that: I don't know where that happens anymore. There are some issues there. Maybe I'm beginning to sound like a priest here. I'd better get off that.

3:20

The other thing I would say to you is about the whole question of phys ed. My background: at one time I was a phys ed person. Again, believe it or not, I thought the half hour of phys ed in schools was excellent. I think it was a great idea. I think it was the way it was handled that was the bad idea. I would ask you, in terms of this question of children's health, if there is some way we are measuring in our schools what's happening with that program. Is it doing the job with our kids? I just had this knee surgery last year, and the doctor certainly told me about my body. He told me this . . .

Ms Pastoor: One minute, Jack.

Mr. Flaherty: One minute? I'm getting kicked off.

Well, I just want to look at this whole thing, but phys ed, to me, I hope somebody can measure. We have – and I'll bring it up maybe someday to the minister – a nutrition problem, an obesity problem in our schools and in our society, and I think it's a very serious one. I think prevention, working at the end that you're in, sir, especially the elementary school and junior high, could cut down a lot of our costs at the other end.

I'll leave it at that. I'm being told again by my own colleagues to sit down. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. Five minutes isn't long, so I'm going to try and do a whole bunch of questions. One left over for the Minister of Children's Services is: what supports are available through Children's Services to children with disabilities who are

being home-schooled? An example that I would have out of my own constituency is a woman who is capable of working with her autistic child, and there's a special – what's the word? It's not treatment, but there's a special criterion. There's a special way of working with children. I'm sorry. It has initials, and I've forgotten. But her suggestion is that rather than keep the child in a school where they weren't receiving that extra training that had been done from zero to six, now when they're in the school, they lose it. She would prefer that that money from the school be given to her, and she can use those dollars in her own home to use that special training.

The other thing that I was going to go on was family violence. It's a huge issue in this province. This province has the highest rate of family violence and spousal homicide. It really is a devastating social problem. I realize that the funding has been increased, but I think we need to have a better evaluation to find out if this really is having meaningful impacts on the rates of family violence and the experience of survivors. I've had the opportunity to raise general concerns elsewhere, so the purpose of this debate, again I'd like to repeat, is to focus on the cross-ministry aspect of these concerns.

To the Minister of Children's Services: what is the government doing to help disabled women who are the victims of abuse or violence perpetrated by family members? This sometimes goes into the public guardian side of things as well. It's the same as in elder abuse. Often it is the family, and it is such a tricky problem to work with. Sometimes it's almost impossible that we can help, yet we can see it happening in front of our eyes. It's really quite devastating.

Although goal 6 of the seniors' business plan, page 259, outlines a commitment to safeguarding people with disabilities from abuse, the only performance measure linked to the goal is the percentage of dependent adult private guardianship. I've just spoken to that, and I'm not sure what department that would come out of, but there has to be some kind of support and counselling with that family to perhaps break that cycle. If not, then we have to get these people out of harm's way.

To the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. Often forms are severely underreported, and disabled women face heightened barriers when attempting to help themselves. How will your ministry have any idea whether or not the efforts are working? That's sort of a redundant question, but I think you can see where I'm going.

Elder women, as I've mentioned before, are very vulnerable to violence and abuse. The Canadian Panel on Violence against Women estimates that 1 in 10 elder persons are victims of abuse, and two-thirds of these are women. Nonetheless, the government has made inadequate provisions for seniors' shelters. Only two seniors' shelters serve the entire province of Alberta, and the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters reports that they are underfunded and short on space. Because of my past profession I have witnessed this elder abuse on older women, and it's just mind boggling.

To the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports: do you have plans to increase the provision of shelter services to seniors who are victims of elder abuse? We need a co-ordinated response.

To the Minister of Children's Services: can you describe what efforts are being made at the assistant deputy minister level or higher to create a similar mechanism with the authority for long-term planning in Alberta to co-ordinate within these departments towards violence against women and seniors and the shelters and supports that they would need?

We often speak about prevention, and it's important to provide at least some measure of respite and protection to survivors of abuse. However, it's not going to end the abuse against women. So far we've only witnessed the symptoms and not the cause. The root causes against women often stem from gender inequality.

Mr. Liepert: I'll try to answer a few of the questions right off the top. The Member for St. Albert raised the issue around security. It's always a delicate balance because at the end of the day we want our schools to be friendly places. We don't want schools where you literally have to swipe to get in and out of every door that you enter. I know that some of the schools that I've toured this year have locked-door policies while classes are going on. It really, I think, again comes down to an individual school board decision. There are, obviously, some parts of cities and some parts of the province that school boards determine are less or more safe than others. But one of the things I would not like to see our schools become is not a friendly place to enter.

There was a question regarding the curriculum. We do have several initiatives that relate to curriculum. One that I can think of is with AADAC. We've got a program through AADAC that is part of the curriculum. There's probably more that could be done there, but that's one that comes to mind.

The hon. member mentions something that I think is very important, and that's the whole idea of: where does school start and society end? We just simply live in a different world today than when those of us who are sitting in this Assembly went to school. It would be a goal of mine at some future point that every student that so chose had the ability to have an outside mentor. I'm not sure at what age that might start. You know, the reality of it is today that we have an awful lot of our children in school who are from one-parent families. I think that an outside mentor in some of these circumstances would go a long way to not only assisting that student through the school years but helping that student think about the after-school years, where their careers might go. So that's something that we intend to work hard on in the next period of time.

The hon. member mentioned phys ed. It's probably too soon to do any kind of real assessment on where we're at with our phys ed initiatives. I guess the thing that I always sort of question around phys ed is: you know, there sure was no gymnasium when I went to school. We were kicked outside to play something that we called speed ball in the snow. You tackled each other and whatever you did, and you stayed warm, and none of us were obese, I don't think. Somebody said to me the other day that probably one of the real ways to deal with obesity is that the school bus should drop kids off three blocks from school and let them walk.

3:30

One thing that I did find very interesting last week when I was in Leduc in the Black Gold school division: they actually have an obesity intervention program, and they have had some 300 students go through the obesity intervention program. Let me rephrase that. A school official will determine that it is in the best interests of the child to have a discussion with the parents relative to that child's physical fitness. They have a tremendous physical fitness facility over the gymnasium, and they've won international awards for it. It's sad that we have to have our schools do that, but I believe that's, unfortunately, part of the society we live in today.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you. Again, I'll get back with lots more information, but I'll make a few comments about family violence. You know, without a doubt we know that this has devastating consequences for our province and Albertans. We also know that it is true that we have the highest reported rate across Canada. I'm glad to say, though, that we are also known to be taking the most amount of action on this particular issue.

Just a couple of areas where we are taking action and I think we're making great headway is in our legislation. We added "stalking" to

the definition of family violence, and we also made some changes regarding households when it came to that issue that you referred to, abuse of the elderly. We also have some very successful awareness campaigns and education initiatives. Our information lines, our help lines, and the websites have had unbelievable access, the number of hits. I think that that's just fabulous for this province. As well, the community initiatives and the local projects that we have going.

[Mr. VanderBurg in the chair]

Just to highlight some of the changes and the announcements regarding women's shelter. We have a budget of just about \$36 million. I think that overall, with partnering departments, it's about \$46 million. The women's shelter is a large part of what we do, and we are, I think, at around \$22 million of funding. Last week we were able to make some announcements regarding safe visitation sites. It's a huge part of keeping children safe, related to family violence issues. Very well received. We already have five sites. That's going to allow, I think, another five sites across the province.

The other initiative that was received very positively was \$500,000 of core funding to our sexual assault centres. That brings that core funding up to \$1.5 million.

The community initiatives have been received so well that we bumped that up from \$3 million to \$4.9 million, and again that was well received. That initiative funds projects like HomeFront in Calgary. A lot of these are community-based programs, so they'll deal with local issues and what is a priority in their areas.

The other initiative that was quite good – and I think this is more than women's shelters. It deals with our child care workers. It deals with thousands of people that are delivering services to children and families across the province. It has to do with how we value the work that they do, and part of that is paying attention to how these people are living and what they're getting paid. With women's shelters in February we announced a 3 per cent increase that was retroactive to April 1, 2006. Last week we announced another 3.5 per cent, and that was retroactive to April 1, 2007.

The other great initiative is the bursaries that have been announced. Very well received, whether they be the women's shelter bursary – we gave \$400,000 to put towards skilled training for some of their leadership staff. As well, we gave a \$100,000 grant to the Council of Women's Shelters so that they could work with colleges and look at online training for staff: another very positive move.

What I can tell you is that we are absolutely committed to moving forward on the family violence initiative. We have moved forward in a number of areas, and I will get back to you with some detailed information on that. I very much appreciate your raising that as an issue.

The Acting Chair: The minister of seniors.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In response to family violence – and I won't go through all the things – we do participate in a cross-ministry initiative led by Children's Services to certainly address the critical issue of family violence. We do work on raising awareness with all of the stakeholders. It's very essential. You mentioned that we do support funding at this stage for only two seniors' safe houses, the Kerby Rotary House in Calgary and the Edmonton Seniors Safe House. Our budget in this ongoing year doesn't call for additional funding for more houses, so I can't say that there are additional houses being contemplated at this stage, though addressing it for education and enforcement, I would say, is essential.

As you're aware, there are new standards in supportive living that require staff in facilities to be trained in preventing abuse and reporting abuse, standards that you and the Member for Lethbridge-East worked very diligently on to ensure that these things are brought to awareness and that there is far more training and education of staff and people that are working among the elderly or otherwise.

The Acting Chair: We'll hear from the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you. You know, it's unfortunate that many people still see publicly funded child care and early education as unfriendly to families, as state meddling in the nurseries of the nation. The history of early childhood education shows us something quite different. I go back to Maria Montessori, who founded schools for children whose families were challenged in providing the basics, and Friedrich Froebel, the founder of kindergarten, who recognized that poverty could be emotional. He developed a children's garden where education, care, and a constructive approach to life went hand in hand. Before and after school care is an essential service for many families to help provide that children's garden, if you like, of education and care.

Out of school care refers to services that promote the social development of children and their families and includes support services for young school-aged children. Services are provided before and after school and during lunch. A joint study undertaken by the cities of Calgary and Edmonton identified out of school care as a major contributor to the quality of life for children, parents, the community, and society in general. If families know that their children are safe before and after school when they go to work, it gives them peace of mind. They're probably more productive at work. They're happier families, which leads to happier communities and happier cities.

The provincial government does not directly fund out of school care. Instead, this crucial service is operated and funded by FCSS. FCSS is a crucial organization for family and community support services. It helps to improve Alberta's social infrastructure. This infrastructure is instrumental in preventing social problems from growing in scope. Funding for FCSS is truly an investment in social health and quality of life in Alberta. FCSS received an additional \$3 million for a total of \$71.2 million, a 4.3 per cent increase. That's from the estimates, page 64.

Out of school care is only one of the essential services provided by FCSS. As the population and income gap in this province grow, FCSS will certainly require extra resources. How can you justify increasing their budget by less than the rate of inflation? After reading the report mentioned above, I was struck by the difference out of school care makes to the parents, children, and teachers involved with this program. This social investment would certainly be beneficial to all families with parents that work outside of the home. To the Minister of Children's Services: how many people are currently enrolled in out of school care programs, and how many open spaces are available? What is the eligibility for these programs? The most recent annual report from FCSS notes a growing concern over the lack of funding and programming available in rural areas. How many out of school care spaces are available to children in rural areas?

To the Minister of Education: have you considered implementing a permanent policy body that could co-ordinate between the Department of Education and Children's Services on the issues of early childhood development programs such as out of school care, school nutrition, and junior kindergarten?

3:40

I'm pleased to see that the government is beginning to realize the importance of using incentives to attract and retain child care workers. Especially, I'm glad that we're including retention there because we must value the people we already have.

I'm afraid the size and scope of the \$7.4 million Children's Services budget contained in this year's budget will not be enough. Not long ago I received a letter from Natasha Michaud, who was the director of an out of school care program in Edmonton. Natasha was very distressed by the current staffing situation in out of school care. To the Minister of Children's Services: will you extend the recently announced initiatives aimed at retaining staff in the child care sector to workers in the out of school care program? I think their work is just as valuable. They work just as hard; they care just as much. They provide a service to children – for that children's guardian I mentioned earlier – to families, and to our communities. They deserve the recognition, the regard of being a profession that really matters.

I think that's my time.

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

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for being so objective in letting me stand here. I'm going to touch on a few things that I want to try and clean up. One of the areas looks at the Minister of Education, and maybe he can share some thoughts with me on this. I'd be very interested in hearing his thoughts because I do believe he believes in prevention.

The mandate from the Premier includes improving early learning opportunities for young children, and the Ministry of Children's Services' first goal is to ensure that children have a healthy start in the first six years. I think I've addressed that from the one to three thing, but the question on kindergarten is very important because, you see, a recent survey showed that 85 per cent of Albertans would support fully funded full-day and junior kindergarten programs. Well, the question is: will the government commit to looking at this, and will the government commit the funding necessary for the additional infrastructure program and staffing needed to implement these programs?

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

It was interesting, and I'm reluctant to – I'm not reluctant, I'll talk about it, but I don't have enough detail about this. I'm going to just throw this out to the minister because it's in Calgary, and I know he may follow up on it, and that's encouraging. One of the school boards, the Catholic board in Calgary, in the budget – they have a mandate there. I understand that there are 42 high-risk kindergarten classes that they get funding for. But what they got upset about – and I think maybe the minister's already been asked about this – was that they felt that there was a shift in their mandate to go into ESL, the children.

Now, maybe they have perception problems, and they feel someone's picking on them. The point is that they felt that this was done without consultation. They have 42 high-risk classes that they say are drawing a \$1.8 to \$2 million deficit, and they're wondering why that was not looked at in the budget. If they go into the ESL part of the program, that seems to be suggested in the budget – I think it was \$7 million, but I may be out on my figure, so don't hold me to it. They're wondering why that happened. The implication here for that board is that if they've got to get into that area, they don't have the transportation or the infrastructure to handle that ESL program. So I'm just raising it with the minister. He might want to check. I'm just wondering.

We're talking about the very important part of kids starting school, and there are some wonderful programs across the province. I can think of my grandchildren in Okotoks. There is just a very, very wonderful program. One of the things I want to commend again: because of your funding my grandson's problem with hand/eye co-ordination in his writing was picked up. He's still not doing great at writing; he writes like me. But he's improving, and that's the key thing, and that's very, very important.

Now, one of the things that we talked about earlier was counselling, and I know a little bit about counselling. It was interesting last year. We have a thing in my constituency that I brag about: Java with Jack. It's being set up again this summer.

What happened to me. I went to some of the smart schools in St. Albert. It's scaring me what's going to happen. They're all dominated by women that are highly academic, successful. These are women with 80 to 90 per cent in their magic six academic subjects, and they're saying: "Mr. Flaherty, we didn't get any help with our career choices. They ship you to the computer and that. We don't have anyone to talk to about that."

What I get concerned about is two aspects: career, because my background's in that area, and old Dr. Zeal.* Some of you know Dr. Zeal. I used to think he was a Chicago gangster, but he was smart. He talked about the importance of career counselling not only for the academic student but for the career-educated student, especially those career students that are going out into the world of work when they're only in grade 11. They get intimidated by these foremen and bosses and all that. There's no one in the school – the teachers are so busy; the principal is so busy – to help those kids, and I have talked to many parents about that. You know, when you think of kids today and adolescence, boy, what they're going through in their personal development let alone their own careers is unbelievable.

The Chair: Does the hon. Minister for Children's Services wish to respond?

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you. I'd like to just go back to some of the comments on FCSS, and that kind of leads into the out of school child care. First of all, I agree with you, hon. member. I think that FCSS programs are probably the best example of partnerships that we have in this province. We have, you know, just thousands of locally driven preventative programs that have been developed and implemented, and I think that their services are top notch.

I know that I've referred to this before. The FCSS report has been completed. Just in the last couple of days I sat down with the provincial organization of the FCSS and went through the results of the report and some of the recommendations in it. It will be public in the next several days, and then it'll be public what the recommendations are. I can tell you that the association received them quite well, and some of how we roll out the budget for FCSS will be based on that report.

With respect to the out of school – and it's no secret – I have mentioned over the last couple of months that in that report probably one of the largest issues identified was some of the gaps with respect to out of school programs. What exists in the province and makes it not an easy solution to deal with quickly is the fact that while we license zero to six programs and six to 12, we do not have the mandate to provide services for child care in the six to age 12 group. How we do fund that is through our funding through FCSS, and then areas locally determine if that is a program that they want to deliver and then do that if they so choose. Right now we have, I do believe, 44 child care programs that are operating across the province in out of school care. What I have told the association – and I know that I've told the House before – is that I will work with the stakeholders

*This spelling could not be verified at the time of publication.

involved in that sector and take a look at some workable solutions in that area.

Just with respect to some of the comments, you know, thank you for the compliments regarding some of the changes to zero to six. I think they have been well received, and I do think that they will be successful in ultimately creating space, which is one of the goals that we have this year. With respect to making some of those changes, applying them to out of school care, again because of the lack of mandate, not possible. I should mention that we did extend the bursaries to out of school care. We did have the capabilities of doing that, so that will be available to the staff that are working in out of school right now.

I think that's all I wanted to say.

3:50

Mr. Liepert: I didn't get a lot of questions out of the hon. Member for St. Albert. I got a lot of passion, and I got some suggestions. But the couple of questions in there I'll try and answer. The member talked in many ways about the same sorts of things that I've been talking about, and that is the involvement of the business community not to privatize our public schools but to ensure that our students that are coming out of high school have some guidance and some assistance on what they might want to seek as a career.

I was told this morning that if there is one thing that we are falling behind on globally, it is that we are still graduating students with high academic skills, but they're not quite as competitive as they need to be internationally. We're now competing with countries that have a long history of having to be competitive to survive. I think a more collaborative effort with the outside world can make our students start to become more competitive. We have the genesis of that to some degree in what is called Careers: the Next Generation. Many of you would know Eric Newell, who has got a fine reputation not only in the business community but in the education community in this province, and he's very much promoting this concept. So I think we're heading down that path. There's lots more to be done. I would certainly agree.

The hon. member raised the issue with Calgary Catholic board, and I will look into what he's referencing. I believe that what he's referencing, though, is full-day kindergarten for children that are in need and at risk, that Calgary Catholic, like many other school boards, has implemented. There is debate whether full-day kindergarten is a benefit. I must say that in my meetings with school boards around the province it's split. Many school boards believe that the funding method that we have today whereby school boards have the choice to pick and choose where they might want to have full-day kindergarten versus blanket full-day kindergarten – we've got many school districts who have actually implemented pilot projects of full-day kindergarten.

I think this is something that I'd like to take a year or two to assess, see how it's working. As the hon. member would know, the recommendation of the Learning Commission relative to full-day kindergarten and junior kindergarten was taken to our caucus and was not approved, and while we may have had a change in leadership, it's still the same caucus. So it would not be my intent to go back to caucus with that proposal.

Just very briefly, there was a question from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods relative to co-ordination of ECS services, and we, in fact, do have a cross-ministry committee of deputies dealing with the co-ordination of ECS services. But there's no question. Like any of these cross-ministry initiatives I'm sure there are improvements that can be made to the delivery of services, especially to young children who have some sort of mild or moderate learning difficulty because in many cases they aren't identified early enough. So that's ongoing work.

The Chair: No one else wish to supplement?

The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. I'll just wrap up. I'll do some questions that actually came from my colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods, and I'll go quickly.

Education, review of coding. Who is doing it? Please include special ed teachers. Often curriculum development does not include the teachers that actually teach the subject.

Counsellors. We need them in every school to keep students and families working with the agencies, and a reasonable level of local autonomy would be in the detection of allowing elected bodies to be accountable and responsive to all of the community needs at the local level.

Brochures for preschool special needs are good, but adults also need something to help them know which service providers really are available. I believe that we've heard that there's work towards that end.

I'll just wrap up and say thank you very much to the ministers and certainly their staff and thank you to my colleagues. I believe that we got what I believed we were aiming for, which was a true exchange of information and ideas of how we can actually all better serve the Albertans that we're all responsible for. So I thank all of the departments, and I know that we'll each go and speak with our people that we've worked with to do a debriefing on how we can make this process better. But I for one am very pleased with the process and the way it has gone. I'm hoping the other side will feel the same.

Thank you.

The Chair: Are there others on the opposition side? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you. I just want to say that this has been a very useful process and thank you all for your attention and your work to help Alberta's children.

I do want to mention one thing that has always bothered me. My background is a school administrator, and the last years were in high school. High schools get about \$18,000 for a special-needs aide, a full-time aide. The cost to the school is \$38,000, so the other \$20,000 comes from operating costs; in other words, the general population is paying for that need. I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't have aides. They're absolutely invaluable. They do wonderful work. But I think that we need to recognize that there is a financial cost there that's not being adequately funded.

Thank you.

Mr. Liepert: I'll just make a couple of quick comments. I appreciate the kind words from the Member for Lethbridge-East. I do think it has been a good exchange. I don't think there's anyone sitting in this House today that doesn't want to have the best for our young people who have challenges. The question is ensuring that you identify them early enough and have the proper processes in place, that parents don't get frustrated trying to access the services.

There were a couple of comments made I believe on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie relative to more counsellors in schools and involving special-ed teachers in the development of the curriculum. I'll take those under advisement.

Relative to the comments from the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods I agree that twice as much money would probably give us twice as much benefit. The question really comes down to how much can you afford to spend on education versus how much can you afford to spend on health care and seniors. I think we're always

trying to get that balance, and it's not an easy balance. We all for our particular departments try and identify the needs. It would be nice if we could get more money for certain things, but I think the reality of it is you come up with what you feel is fair and make the best that we can. At the end of the day I would feel comfortable stacking up our programs when it comes to special needs with any in the country.

I would conclude on that.

The Chair: One minute left. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you. The previous comments from Lethbridge-East were mine, not Edmonton-Ellerslie.

We are doing a wonderful job in this province. I have no doubt of that. But I think it's incumbent upon us always to strive for excellence for the day when we don't have poverty concerns interfering with education, for the day when everybody feels safe and secure, and I think we've got a distance to go.

Thank you.

4:00

The Chair: Half a minute left if the minister wants to respond.

The time is elapsed for the Liberal opposition. The next half hour is dedicated to the ND opposition. I'll recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. A pleasure to rise and join the debate on the estimates for several ministries here: the ministry responsible for seniors, the ministry responsible for children's services, family services; and the Ministry of Education. I want to express my appreciation for the presence of all the ministers here and their respective staff.

Mr. Chairman, given that in this rotation the NDP caucus has only 30 minutes available to it, it's best, therefore, for me to perhaps confine my observations and questions to one ministry, and that ministry of choice for me will be the Children's Services ministry. The Minister of Education perhaps can relax for a little while.

The second observation, Mr. Chairman, that I want to make is that the rotation structure that the House leaders have agreed to – the first hour and a half are for the Liberal opposition, then a half hour for the NDP in this rotation, and so on – does create some difficult situations. I may be asking questions that may already have been asked several times, and I wouldn't want to be doing that. I'm trying, hopefully, to be innovative and see if I can ask some questions that may have been overlooked or not asked because of time constraints or whatever. But it's inevitable that there will be some repetition, so I hope they'll be understanding of that. I'm not just trying to waste the time of the House or of the ministers here with my observations.

I want to start, therefore, with the budget for Children's Services, especially for child care, that has included an increase of 5.6 per cent, I guess, in the subsidies that qualifying families will receive as a result of this budget. The incomes to qualify are indicated by the minister in one of the communications – I'll see if I can find this – but there are, certainly, ranges, between 35,000-some dollars to about 38,000-some dollars depending upon whether it's a single-parent family or a two-parent family with one child or two children and so on and so forth. But the range is between there.

Now, the first question that occurred to me has to do with many of these families. Even for these families the adequacy of a 5.6 per cent increase in light of the fact that many of these families that will be qualifying for subsidy will also be families that are renting their housing accommodation and knowing the rise in rents – and this

House has been engaged in the scale of this increase in rental costs to families – I wonder if the 5.6 per cent increase in the subsidies will compensate for the 10 to 20 to 25 to 30 per cent increase in rental costs for the same families. So that's a question that I think needs addressing. Just focusing on the increases to subsidies without addressing the context in which this increase is taking place would not be very productive. I think we really have to be serious about asking whether or not this increase that's built into this budget for increasing the subsidies for parents who qualify – this is a very important question that needs to be addressed, and I hope that the minister will respond to it in some detail.

The second related question, of course, is the cut-off, you know, the qualifying incomes. What happens to that given the changed circumstances in which all kinds of costs for families are going up? Particularly, the rental portion of the family budgets is going to be really hit hard and is going to increase exponentially over the year for which this budget is being proposed and the year following. At least for the next two years we can expect massive increases in the rental costs to all families. So the second question, then, has to do with these income cut-offs or the income level thresholds and the ceilings that are presently in place which would allow certain families to qualify for subsidies and others not.

Is the minister in a position to make some comments on whether or not there's a need, in fact, given the changed circumstances with respect to rental costs in particular, not just that these income levels that have been in place need a revision? Is the minister willing to look at that? If so, what kind of impact will that have on the proposed budget? If more monies are needed, where are they going to come from? Are they going to be shifted within the budget, or how is the minister proposing to deal with that?

Another question, if I may move on, has to do with the prevention of family violence and bullying item in the budget, program expenses. It's increased by 7.6 per cent. First of all, I know that combining this or collapsing these two categories, prevention of family violence and bullying, which takes place I would think not only in the family context but outside, perhaps in the schoolyard mostly, out in the street or in the communities in general – I find it not terribly helpful. I'm seized of the importance of the relative scarcity and shortage of funding for women's shelters, for example, for victims of family violence who have to leave home and seek shelter somewhere else.

In order for us to be able to assess the adequacy of funds available and budgeted here for prevention of family violence and protection of those who become victims of it, I think we need to break down these two categories into separate subitems so that the question then is: what percentage of these 36 million and some dollars or what dollars out of this are allocated for bullying? The minister might want to also comment on whether or not bullying is an activity which takes place also within the family context and not just outside in the schoolyard or wherever. What dollars are for prevention of family violence? You know, the two categories. I think that's the next question that I had here.

This is a question, I'm afraid, that has been asked perhaps, but I'm going to repeat this, and just ignore it if it's answered. I'll see it in the *Hansard*. Protecting children from sexual exploitation. In this House over the years there has been a great deal of concern about children's sexual exploitation. We have been of course told again and again by a variety of ministers that this is a serious problem. It's a growing problem in our cities and towns, and it needs very special attention. I notice here that the budget allocation for this particular program is hardly changed from last year, maybe \$3,000 more,

whereas if you look at inflation, look at the increase in wage costs for people who are supposed to provide this care, it simply will be inadequate. This budget, to me, seems to be cut back.

I'll stop here and let the minister answer these questions.

4:10

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you. Once again, regardless of whether the questions have been raised before or not, I'll make sure that you get the answers to these questions if I don't get to cover everything.

To talk about the child care budget, you're right. The cut-offs and the ranges have not changed, but if I can just kind of backtrack and give you a little bit of the reason for that. As soon as I was appointed minister – and this was identified as a priority – I spent an awful lot of time with stakeholders, that being operators of child care, parents. The number one issue – well, there are actually a few, but we had to make sure that we would create affordable, quality child care spaces and make them accessible. It didn't take long and too much time with stakeholders to realize that when we're talking about space creation, what we really had to talk about was the attraction and retention of staff. When we talked to people across the province, there were a lot of areas where facilities are not a problem. We have all kinds of people coming to the plate in terms of offering space. It really came down to making sure that we had the staff. The child care centres just could not operate without staff, and we knew that child care staff were leaving their positions.

The reason I say all of that. What we've moved forward on really is based on what stakeholders had to say. Without a doubt, they all said that the five-point plan was a very good basis, and it really was the foundation to work from. We had way more families accessing subsidies. The wage top-ups were working and kind of slowed down the number of staff leaving the sector. The whole kin child care was very well received and is very well received and particularly offered new choices in rural Alberta. The number of accredited programs have significantly increased, and in terms of being interested in providing quality, that's been a very successful initiative. So the number one concern really was taking a look at the number of ways that we could impact the attraction and retaining of staff.

Now, making it affordable for parents was a concern as well, but I would suggest that the recommendations were just really to take a look at the cost-of-living index and adjust it to that level. We didn't play around with that much more than that. I think that the end result with the kinds of, you know, additional wage top-ups, the bursaries for child care workers, the increased professional development, the attracting staff back, the northern allowance – with all of that I think we will see improvements sooner than later, and we'll actually achieve the additional capacity that we're looking for.

In terms of the cost of bullying I'll get that detailed information for you, in terms of what it is we spend on bullying out of the family violence budget. Just to make a few comments on that. I had mentioned this earlier. Bullying continues to be a priority for the government, and we will continue to focus on that initiative this year. I think it's more important now than ever to make sure that we focus on raising awareness of the impact of bullying, identifying what it is that we can do to stop that behaviour, and really encouraging a change in societal attitudes because we know that the whole dimension of bullying has changed quite dramatically. What I had mentioned earlier is the number of hits – the success of our info lines, the helplines, and the websites has been absolutely phenomenal. We have a real appetite out there for information, and I think it's incumbent on us to continue on with that initiative.

There was one other thing: sexual exploitation. Again, I'll get the details for you. You were talking about the lack of the same level of

increase in that particular area. Some of it had to do with what the budget had in terms of setting up some of the Internet and websites as well as some of the advertising, one-time costs, but I'll get back to you.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank the minister for trying to address on her feet some of the questions that require, I guess, more investigation and information than would be available to anyone in her position at this point.

I want to compliment the minister for the work that she's been doing on behalf of families and children in her responsibility for this particular portfolio. She's been working hard, and I have no reason to question her intention to continue to move forward with positive changes and expansion of delivery of services and improving the quality of the services that are delivered to needy families and children. I commend her for her commitment and dedication to our families and children.

Children, of course, are very, very vulnerable members of our communities, in our families and outside. The most vulnerable of all children, Mr. Chairman, it's sad to have to observe, are the children of First Nations communities and children who come from First Nations families. I wonder if the minister would be able to shed some light on the number of First Nations children in the care of the government. Is there some sort of pattern over the last few years, or what's happening to this picture? Is it improving? Is it persistent and resistant to any attempts to change it for the better?

I raise this question because at the national level this question was raised earlier, I think on Monday or Tuesday, and it has generated some debate. A great deal of concern has been expressed by the First Nations national leaders with respect to the very, very high overrepresentation preponderant – not just preponderance but huge overrepresentation – of First Nations children in care. I know this matter concerns all of us a great deal. We know that those who work in the field have found and have been confronted with frustrations year after year after year in making a dent in the problem. But I think that in order for us at the provincial level to develop an effective response to this problem, a response that will in fact make some difference, we have to be quite well informed about numbers among children in care. What's the total number of children in care? Of that, what's the number of First Nations children in care?

Similarly, children on the street, who need protection from sexual exploitation. We know, I think, perhaps the numbers overall, but what's the percentage and in absolute terms the number of First Nations children on the street who are in need of protection and/or are receiving the support and protection of this department or other related departments who may share this responsibility?

4:20

Mr. Chairman, the minister made, I think, a very interesting observation that when she took over this portfolio, she found out as she was consulting with stakeholders – and perhaps the department staff knew before that – that given the wage levels and in spite of the five-point program that was introduced by the government I think a year and a half ago – it wasn't last year; the year before, I think – which in fact seemed to have identified the problem of recruitment and retention of people who provide services and care in child care centres, the problem was the low wage levels, no opportunity to improve on their educational qualifications, to upgrade their skills. So the five-point program, I think, was intended in part to respond to that difficulty, that there may be lots of buildings and physical facilities available, but there simply weren't people able to provide

these services, child care workers who could be recruited at the low wages and benefits that are associated with the work that they were doing.

Now, last year I think there was \$30 million in underspending. The province did have a golden opportunity because we did receive about \$69 million from the federal government the year before to be able to step into that huge gap and respond effectively. But because timely action wasn't taken, I think \$30 million remained unspent. Those potential child care spaces, in terms of physical space that could have been made available and offered to families in need, simply couldn't be accomplished because there were no people that could be recruited. Staff wasn't available to provide those services in those potential spaces.

It's regrettable that a great opportunity was lost and that \$30 million was unspent. In fact, I've been asking myself: why is it that that money remained unspent? Now I can understand it. I think it was in part because you simply couldn't use that money at the existing rates of pay and wages to attract more people back. In fact, this area of child care has been losing people to other areas in the economy. So the net gain was a result of not having taken these additional funds that came from the federal government and putting them in place so that child care workers could find doing this work not only attractive in terms of their occupational commitments and interests, but also find that it pays wages that they can live on, that they can expect to get a living wage out of providing this very, very important service, child care, to young children who need it very badly.

The other question related to this, of course, is how that money that came from the federal government was spent. Probably the question has been asked. I understand that Alberta up to this point has not sent a report to the federal government with respect to the expenditure of those funds. A report was expected. Some provinces have submitted such reports. Alberta is one of those five or six provinces that still to this point has not, and the question is: why? You talk about accountability. You talk about transparency about public funds. Whether these funds come from the federal level, they are taxpayers' funds, and whether they are our own provincial general revenue funds, they have to be accounted for.

One way of accounting for those funds is to prepare a report and make it available to at least those agencies or institutions that in the first place made those funds available. We have an accounting to give for \$69 million that came down from federal government, which we could have used. In fact, we failed to use the budgeted amount of \$147 million – was it? – in the child care area for 2005-2006. Of that, lots of money came from the federal government.

I remember asking questions of the former Minister of Children's Services to address this issue, and she said that she would. In the meantime, things have changed. So I'm asking again: is it the case with the five-point plan that although its conceptualization as a sort of framework was there, the resources weren't put at the disposal of the minister and the departmental staff for them to proceed with it, implement it immediately so that we could have spent this money to provide quality services in terms of child care to families who have to wait and can't get in?

So that's the question that I hope the minister . . . [Dr. Pannu's speaking time expired]

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Tarchuk: Well, thank you. Just to start with the aboriginal children in care. In terms of the numbers that you had asked for, this is a hugely important area to us because we know that aboriginal children make up 8 per cent of the child population in Alberta, but

they are 58 per cent of the children in care. Out of the 8,805 children that we have in care, 5,178 are aboriginal. I know that this is a concern not just for us; it's a big concern to elders and leaders in communities across Alberta and across the rest of the country.

Just a little bit of information about our approach to aboriginal services in this province. We are committed to looking at improvements in that area. We do want to reverse those numbers. I know that when we put the enhancement act in place a couple years ago, it was incumbent on us and put in the legislation that we consider and consult with aboriginal people on the care for their children, also to pay attention to the cultural needs. As you know, we've got the delegated First Nations agencies. We have 18 of them in the province. On all of our family and child service authorities one of the co-chairs is aboriginal as well as some of the members on each one. Through our legislation and agreements that we have with the DFNAs, we have to recognize the importance of the culture, and we do involve elders and extended family in working together to improve outcomes for the children.

Some interesting stats here: there's been a real focus on trying to place aboriginal children in their own communities and, if they're unable to go back to their families, to place them with extended families. As of December 2006 we have over a thousand aboriginal children that have been placed through the kinship care program, so that's been very popular. Now, immediate family members are also encouraged, if it suits their family situation, to become foster parents as well.

I think that probably the most important announcement in the last couple of weeks that we've been part of as a government is the historical INAC announcement that was made April 27. This really will fundamentally change the way that child and family services are delivered on reserve. You're probably aware that the federal government has committed I think it was just over \$15 million to provide early intervention services on reserve, and that's something that we've been advocating with our aboriginal partners for the federal government to do for a number of years. In this announcement the federal government chose Alberta as being the first province to launch the funding because of the Alberta response model and are encouraging that that be a model that should be looked at across the country. You know, that was great recognition of the really good work that's been done in this province in that area. Thanks again to our staff for the commitment that they have and just the real desire to see if we can reverse the kind of stats that we have in this particular area.

With respect to child care, you had mentioned the reporting. With the federal funding in the first couple of years, the five-year funding that ended up getting cancelled going into the third year, there was never a requirement for us to report. So the articles that you're referring to, saying that Alberta was one of the . . .

4:30

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt, hon. minister, but the time is now open for all members of the Assembly to participate. I will recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm very pleased and honoured to rise in my first time up in supply. In doing so, I'm pleased to recognize a research assistant who is with me here today, Kirstyn Rau, from the fine central Alberta community of Daysland.

I'll begin with Children's Services, an area of huge concern to many Albertans. Indeed, this morning and yesterday I was at the Construction Owners Association of Alberta conference. There were something like a thousand different representative leaders in the construction industry there earlier today, and they were discuss-

ing many of the ways to try and ensure that we have adequate numbers of qualified and skilled people available for industry in our province, especially in construction of the upgraders and construction of the oil sands plants and things like that.

It came to mind what I've come to know in northeast Edmonton. I've seen the rate of participation in the workforce of women going down. Many women that I have met say that they are staying at home with their children in order to provide their child care. We do have a baby boom going on. We do have a lot of workers – tradesmen, engineers, technicians – in north Edmonton working extended work schedules, 24 and 4 quite often, or 24 days on and 4 days off, and finding that the spouse cannot find adequate daycare, so they're staying at home.

One of the big things this morning at the Construction Owners conference – and there were people from all over the industry, representatives from all facets, not just the owners that were there – was that there are not enough women working in construction. We're not bringing enough women into construction. The daycare issue is one of the key factors in causing the problem in bringing people that could be trained and maybe are already trained into the industry. That was one of the main topics, how to bring women into the industry, this morning at the Construction Owners conference.

My question on this matter is: how do we address this if there's not affordable access to daycare in place, and what is the ministry looking to do to try and ensure that there is child care available for those women who would like to participate in the workforce, especially in some of the nontraditional areas for women?

Just a note. I really appreciate and I've had many comments about the work of the minister, that she's been very conscientious in trying to create quality child care spaces and make them affordable. There are a lot of good comments I've heard about how she's bringing forward the five-point plan, trying to bring forward the various aspects and make them work, the various allowances to achieve additional capacity in our system. I think it's important, very much so, to commend you on that work.

A couple of other issues are certainly the family and spousal violence issue. Alberta does come out as the second highest in Canada. I haven't been able to review all the *Hansard* debates on this issue and what has been said already, but I would just like to know what new initiative the government is looking at to really curb spousal violence. I've seen the press release on May 9, and that was welcome news. But I'm interested to see what the new community programs are in the \$1.9 million and what that might be, coming forward.

An additional area of interest, of course, is the bullying area. It was mentioned earlier in the questioning by the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona while I was here, an area of great concern, understanding that 1 in 10 children is reported to have bullied others in our province and even 25 per cent in grade 4, every 25 minutes in the classroom, an area of tremendous concern. I tabled a report about bullying in the workplace by adults, and maybe training them not to do it is one way to stop kids from learning how to do it. What other initiatives might we be looking for?

Just to ask the chair a question, can I stop now and wait for the answers, or do I have to finish my 10 minutes?

The Chair: You have four minutes left. If the minister responds, that time is deemed to have expired, and then I could recognize you again, but I do have someone else on the list.

Mr. Backs: Okay. So I should finish my next four minutes.

I'll go quickly to seniors. I see that the minister is not here, but I'll maybe ask for written responses to my questions. Seniors was

one of the reasons that I originally ran in the last election, to try and address a number of issues on seniors, seniors' care, and some of the issues that revolve around seniors' care.

The Auditor General's report very much came forward with some of the shortcomings that we noticed a few years ago. You know, one of the things in the 2005 report of the Auditor General stated that only 69 per cent of the standards related to care were met by the facilities examined and that many standards are outdated and must be monitored closely. How is the department improving reliance on these standards and ensuring that these standards are met?

There's added stress because of labour shortages. We've had quite a bit of discussion on the need and how we improve the numbers of people coming in. Has the government looked to ensure that standards are being met in terms of the number of hours being provided for long-term care facilities?

Has the government moved to determine and compare and ensure that rental rates are available and affordable for seniors on limited and fixed incomes?

You know, one of the areas of training that is important in terms of providing care is, of course, those caregivers. One of the areas that I've mentioned in other debates in the Legislature in the last month has been the efforts brought forward by the government of Saskatchewan to train aboriginal on-reserve women to help with many facets of long-term care, be it attendants, be it home-care attendants, be it those who train as practical nurses, and others in the health care professions. They've had some great success in actually bringing forward a number of people into the field who have moved to the cities and have settled in and become very important and contributing, viable parts of the community.

As we look to Edmonton becoming the largest aboriginal city in Canada within a very few short years and looking to the unemployment rate that we do see in our many northern communities, many of which don't have much economic opportunity, I just would like to hear from the ministry as to what they will be coming forward with or if they have been examining that option that Saskatchewan has been so successful with, according to the reports that I've been given.

The AISH reforms. Of course, the \$50 is welcome, and the fact that it is reviewed every two years is welcome. I have quite a number of AISH recipients in my constituency, and they keep on asking me the question: I'm afraid of losing my place because of rent. How will the ministry ensure that rent does not take up most of the AISH recipients' income, and how can they quickly access all the programs available so that they ensure that they do not lose their homes? It's a real and severe fear for many of them.

4:40

We look to seniors. You know, it's a demographic where in 2006 only 10.6 per cent – and that's actually a lot right now – of the population were seniors. That will rise to over a fifth of the population: 21.4 per cent in 2031. We have 142,000 people on the Alberta's seniors' benefit. What is the ministry's forecast in the next 20 years for the use of that benefit?

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you. Okay. You've asked a lot of questions there, so I'll do what I can and get back. Some of them have been raised earlier, so maybe I'll briefly address those, but we'll follow up with more information.

I think I'll start with the bullying because I referred to a little bit of it, but I haven't had to get into that too much. The strategy. We

were just as committed this year as we have been. We're into the third year. When you take a look at the initiatives, what the implementation this year will include is continuing to support communities to address bullying. Of the 225 community incentive fund projects funded in the first two years, 89, or 40 per cent of them, were related to bullying. So you can see that it's of high interest to our communities.

Implementing a youth leadership initiative, which includes a provincial youth bullying committee who provide advice and leadership. Training and tools have been developed to support youth to be leaders in preventing bullying in their communities. We have supported six taking action on bullying parent link sites, which are designed to help parents and schools identify bullying and give kids the skills to address it. I've mentioned a few times today how successful those programs have been.

We're also funding the roots of empathy project in Alberta. That is a community-based antiviolence program that is working to build empathy in grade 1 students. We're also working with Employment, Immigration and Industry in implementation of the seeds of empathy program, which will support immigrant families with young children, ages three to five, attending child care programs. We are in the third year of a three-year public awareness and education campaign focused on educating children, youth, and adults in prevention and safe methods of intervention.

I'll just hop over to child care. I'm not sure if you missed some of the earlier conversation, but first of all thanks for your compliments. There has been a lot of time and energy spent on this particular area. Just to kind of recapture the last couple of months, coming into this position, we knew that we had a severe shortage of spaces in the province. We spent a fair amount of time with stakeholders, finding out what was working well and their ideas on what could be done to improve and increase, particularly, the number of spaces.

Very clear right from the start that what was working well was the five-point plan, all aspects of it, whether it was the wage top-ups or the kin care accreditation in terms of improving quality in our child care. The subsidies uptake was higher than the last couple of years. It proved to be the right foundation to move forward on. I was really pleased to go through the business planning process and even at that time get commitment, without any confirmation on whether we would get any federal funding, on not only approving the five-point plan but also enhancing it. So that is what we have focused most of our recent initiatives on.

I just wanted to speak in terms of the numbers. We're also conducting a space survey this spring, so we'll have a clear idea by the time we get into the summer just what the landscape is like in terms of spaces across the province and what our needs are. So that'll be very, very helpful information.

As far as your questions, I'll make sure that the Seniors' minister does get those questions and responds to you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. A couple of themes that I want to build upon. First, on Children's Services: to provide safe and secure communities. I want to know from the minister and the staff what they're doing to help the providers that do such good work for your department remain in their jobs with such competitive a workforce? I'm hearing over and over from staff in government that, you know, we're at risk of losing our good people to other industries that will pay them more and will recognize their efforts in not such a constrained work environment. It's very hard for young rising stars that work for your department to get recognized because of the constraints within our labour system. I'd really like to see us

be able to both financially recognize and promote these young stars within your department.

The second issue that I want to talk to you about – and it's the one that I get the most calls about regarding your department – is foster care and the children in protection of foster care. Are you getting enough foster families to take care of the children in need? Again, the hot economy has people thinking about how they manage their own jobs and their own lives and how they can get some time off, and I'm concerned that we're not attracting the quality of families and of homes. I'd like to hear your comments on that.

The other issue that I have, and again building on a stronger Alberta, goes to education. I hear from so many parents that children, the young men and women of our future workforce, are not being prepared properly when they leave grade 12 for the real world here in Alberta. Many of these young teenagers would like to get into the trades earlier. Through their CTS programs in school they'd like to get the recognition for, you know, maybe a first-year welder or a first-year electrician, just to name a few. I mean, there are all kinds of good trades we could promote within our high schools. But parents are really concerned that we're not getting that young workforce ready, and many of them I've hired.

When I got elected in 2001, it was the first time I had a paycheque that my wife didn't sign. We always hired lots of young people and built them into great young workers, but today more and more I'm seeing a problem. When I go to a store and the bill is \$15.25 and I hand them a \$20 bill and a quarter, they're looking at me with a funny expression. These are pretty simple math skills.

You know, the great educators that we have working for us, I think they did a fair job on a difficult student when they dealt with me, and I think they did an even better job with our sons. But today it seems like the teacher has so many other issues to deal with in the classroom, and I'm wondering if that's part of the problem, but I'd like to hear from you.

I would like to go back to Provide Safe and Secure Communities. I'd like to talk to the minister of seniors on what he's prepared to do in his budget, in his business plan, with elder abuse. I'm not talking the elder abuse when someone has a black eye or a broken bone. We can deal with that. It's the financial seniors' abuse that probably 90 per cent of our seniors have to deal with. For many reasons older people are at increased risk. They have something that the crooks and the scam artists want. They have property, they have money, and they're vulnerable. So, you know, I'd really like to know from the minister of seniors in his business plan what he's doing to get that message out. We can have all the laws, and we can have all the lawmakers and enforcers do a number of things, but I think we really need to deal with this and be up front with seniors that they're vulnerable and that they need to be aware that people are after their property and their wealth.

I've seen so many times when a new person comes into a senior's life and family members kind of think: "Oh, this is great. Fred from across the street is paying attention to mom and dad." But before you know it, mom and dad are being duped out of their hard-earned savings or jewellery or many, many other things. So I'm really concerned that we need to get that message out. We need to get the message out early.

4:50

Another thing. I wonder what the minister of seniors is doing when it comes to reverse mortgages? I'm hearing a lot of people talk about reverse mortgages on television and how great of a thing it is. Well, it's great because nobody is really talking about the end, when you have to move out of your home or when a person passes away. Who's going to pay that reverse mortgage, and who's going

to pay all those fees that are loaded on the back end of that reverse mortgage? Who's there to protect the family at that time? I think, again, we need to be aware that there are some serious issues, and it's not always what you see on TV or read in the paper with regard to elder abuse.

I'll sit down and listen to the ministers talk about the issues I've raised.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Chair. Well, I'll try and address some of the comments that were made by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne relative to Education, and there were some other questions that the minister of seniors will handle as well as the Minister of Children's Services.

I guess that I'm a bit taken back with the comments that the member made relative to his encounter with the individual who couldn't calculate \$15.25 from the \$20 bill because consistently our math performance in international testing is among the best in the world, second or third right now in the world. My comment would probably be that our math majors aren't working in the convenience store, so the particular individual that the hon. member happened to be dealing with was probably one of those 10 or 15 per cent of the students who are dropping out of high school that we want to try and keep in high school. I wouldn't want the hon. member to think that somehow our math skills that are being taught by our teaching staff these days are any less or any more inferior than they used to be.

There was another comment made relative to ensuring that our students are ready for the workforce. There's no question that over the past number of years, for whatever reason, we've fallen behind in our ability to provide career and technology study, probably more the physical part of the courses. I think it was a case that equipment has become so expensive. We have to look at different ways of being able to offer those kinds of courses to students, especially in the larger centres. I think it has to be more a co-operative effort between the postsecondary trade schools. I think about Edmonton or Calgary, where maybe we don't necessarily have to have all of the industrial arts components in the high schools. Maybe we can have a much bigger, better facility at the technical and trade schools and have high schools collaboratively work with those trade schools.

The one other final comment I would make before I turn it over to my colleagues is that I mentioned in the House earlier – I'm not sure if the member was in the House at that time or not – that I think the one thing that has been brought to my attention that we have to be diligent about is that our high school graduates and postsecondary graduates need to really have a greater competitive edge than they used to have when they graduated out of high school because they're competing in a global environment where we are competing against countries that have been competitive for hundreds of years. So I think that's something that we have to work on with the business community to promote within our schools.

I think that addresses the issues around education.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Children's Services to supplement.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you. Just to get back to some of the questions on foster care. It's a good question because we all know how important the work of foster parents is. Just so the member knows, we have in this year's budget increased the funding by \$7 million, and that was to help train and support foster parents. That brings the total budget to \$144 million. Now, we are actively recruiting families. We do know that the more homes that we have, the better able we are to match children with foster parents who best meet their

needs. In fact, this year we're dedicating \$650,000 to recruit more foster parents. As well, we work with the Foster Parent Association to determine on an ongoing basis how we can support what it is that they do, and I do have a meeting with them I think in two weeks to go through that.

Two pieces of information that are kind of interesting. As of December 2006 there were approximately 2,500 foster homes in the province; we have 665 kinship care homes in Alberta, and that's when the guardian is an extended family member. In terms of ratios we have approximately 1.9 foster children per foster home in Alberta, and in comparison provinces like Saskatchewan or Ontario both have a ratio of 2.4 children.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you. In response to the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, first off, one of the things we ensured that did happen so we can raise awareness – and I thank the Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne for some of the work he's been doing as chair of the Seniors Advisory Council, specifically on this issue. Some of the information being brought back – and I think these are the kinds of initiatives we need to continue support. Sometimes getting around and seeing what other jurisdictions do and learn from a lot of experience – we don't always have to reinvent everything here. We find a lot of good solutions being practised around the world. I know a conference that he was recently at talked very much about this, and he supplied a report to us on some of the things that we might more proactively do, much of it education related.

You talked about financial abuse being one of the largest single areas of abuse inflicted. Things like social insurance numbers being kept confidential and not in your wallets and working with the federal government on identity theft and making sure those things aren't so readily available are very good proactive ideas. We will follow up and I think work more proactively about educating, making awareness far more understandable of the types of abuse that could happen, and making people better prepared to handle their lives and avoid these pitfalls. One thing I'd like to mention is that we are sponsoring a conference in June on elder abuse. It's promoting the second annual international Elder Abuse Awareness Day. This is on June 15. So there will be more things that will come out, and those are just some of the venues that we could use.

With respect to reverse mortgages there are a number of, obviously, financial instruments that are put out, and I can't really necessarily comment on whether some of them are good, bad, or indifferent, though there are always risks in attendant issues in education that people aren't aware of, like you said: some of the back-end costs that get deferred and what that might mean. I think that's part of what we have to make sure people are fully aware of, the options that are there to take care of their financial situation, especially for seniors, how they could be taken advantage of and making sure of full disclosure. So we'll be happy to follow up with that kind of thought and ongoing education awareness for seniors.

The Chair: I just want to remind all members that the member and the ministers may combine their total speaking time of 20 minutes and just go back and forth – you don't have to speak for 10 minutes – if it's agreeable to all. If that's the case, please advise the chair in advance.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

5:00

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think your suggestion is welcomed. I'm very happy to in fact have that flexibility so that we

are not stuck with this 10-minute framework. You know, we can go back and forth.

I will pick up where I left off, Mr. Chairman. My question is to the Minister of Children's Services. I had a question which didn't get addressed. I'll reiterate it so that the minister can either respond to it now or do it perhaps later. My sense is that it's one that probably she could answer here with the help of the staff who are present. It deals with the sexual exploitation of children. The one simple question I have is: how many children over the last year or two have been served by the protection of children involved in prostitution programs? Just the simple numbers. The ministry reports that 10 to 12 per cent of those involved in street prostitution are children. You know the percentages, obviously. We don't know the numbers on which these percentages are based. What would be the total number of children involved in street prostitution, and of that number how many are children of aboriginal ancestry or background? So that's just one question that was not addressed, although I had asked part of it before.

I have been looking, Mr. Chairman, at the budget numbers here. It seems that under program expenses – I think it's on page 64 of the government estimates, general revenue fund, lottery fund. The item number is 3.0.1, child intervention services. I look back at the other document, the ministry's business plan, and I'm unable to get an idea where this money goes, to which services. It's almost one-third of the program budget of the department, yet I cannot find any details on how this money is spent. It's a very large amount. I looked at the business plan, and unless I'm missing something there, there's no direct reference to this child intervention services. There is \$355,451,000 dedicated to it in the budget, yet there is scant information, as far as I could look for it, that's available. I think we need some fairly detailed address to this question of: where is this money spent? What programs, what activities, and what facilities and services are funded through this particular budget?

I'll sit down and see if the minister wants to address that.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you. I'll start with the PCHIP. The information that I have – and I will follow up and get that in more detail – is that the number of children that we have helped to date has been over 770 and that the feedback surrounding that has been very positive and that an increased number of those youth are receiving voluntary services. So it appears to be working well. I understand that most of it is street prostitution, but in terms of the specific numbers I'll see if I can get that.

However, having said that the bulk of that will be street prostitution, we know that the use of technology has decreased traditional prostitution. I'd just make the comment that a lot of time is going to be spent on educating and training staff and stakeholders and the public to recognize that sexual exploitation is changing because we will need the public's help in identifying the kids that are at risk. We'll need to know what signs to watch for, and we're also making that information available on the website.

I wanted just to follow up what I started to say to you earlier with respect to the federal accountability. When we got that funding in the first two years of the five-year program – and then it was cancelled – there was not a requirement for us to file any papers or be accountable to the federal government. Who we were accountable to and followed up with that accountability is to Albertans. With respect to what happens in the future, I don't know what it is we're getting, don't know what conditions will be tied. But that news coverage was wrong in the last couple of days. We did not have a requirement to account to the federal government.

With respect to child intervention services you're right; it is a huge part of our budget. I will follow up and get a breakdown for you, but what we're talking about is purchasing all kinds of services for children, whether it be their group care counselling, secure treatments – our contracted agency is quite a hefty contract – mental health, family aides as well as our in-home supports. I will get that detailed information back to you.

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

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to rise again. I'd like to focus at this point on Education and, actually, just mainly on a couple of points. One of those has been touched on somewhat by the minister, and that is the collaborative work of trade schools and high schools. I think that's a very important area to explore. I've spoken with a number of the traditional trades and with both union and non-union, people throughout the industry, and there's quite an array in the construction industry. This is one area that's been focused on a lot. Quite an array of companies that work in that industry.

Traditionally, the housing industry has been almost totally non-union, and people from that industry in the past have funnelled into the industrial sector, which in some ways has been much, much more union and has been much more highly paid. There has been co-operation in bringing people up through the different non-union aspects. In years gone by it seems to have gone off. There's a thought that maybe we should be looking at more of that co-operation to end some of these wars that have gone on in the last generation.

I know that in speaking to a number of the building trades, which I know very well, many of them are willing to train apprentices, be they coming into a union or a non-union environment at the end of their apprenticeship. Some of the trades are very well equipped to start them at a very early age and to, you know, look at more European models for training and to look at ways of bringing kids forward that are being lost. It concerns me that we do have these high dropout rates still. It concerns me that we somehow don't value hand knowledge, hand intelligence, hand-to-eye co-ordination, the ability of many people to bring forward their skills and intelligence through different ways than those which we often value academically.

I've talked to, you know, a number of the people in the school boards and all the rest of them, and they've always said: the focus has got to remain academic; the focus has got to remain on funneling kids to the higher levels. But is it actually a higher level to say that university is higher? Maybe they're equal in different levels of intelligence that we're looking at that are in human beings that can provide for very fulfilling and good lives if they are to go into a technical field, if they're going into a trades field. Many of the trades are now very technical. I remember dealing in trying to get certain benefits for heavy duty mechanics. Tools of the trade now are not just wrenches, not just hand tools, but laptops, computer programs, and other such things. These are integral to looking at how to do a diagnostic on a dozer. It's very real.

5:10

Some of the trades have even have gotten together. I know that local 496 of the plumbers and pipefitters in Calgary – I think they got together something like 200 contractors and offered to purchase a facility, if need be, to go ahead with training people in their field, that has a huge shortage, not after high school but before high school and even maybe as low as grade 9. Maybe that makes sense. Maybe that makes sense to keep a lot of kids in school and to look forward

to training people in our labour shortage. Certainly, they've done so in some special cases with aboriginals, have brought in aboriginals to help them train in that area to try and bring forward their skills, some that have not even completed high school but just grade 9 or grade 8.

Another area I'd like to touch on is one that was brought forward to me by some individuals who were concerned that this program has been cut. It's the reading recovery program. I've heard such laudable comments on this program that I thought I'd better raise this particular one. It's a short-term individual literacy intervention program for grade 1 students, six years of age, who appear to be at risk in their learning of reading and writing. It consists of daily 30-minute, one-on-one lessons, and these lessons supplement regular classroom instruction. But the reading recovery is a data-driven thing. It takes explicit, individualized planning and decision-making instruction and continues until the child has reached the average range of the grade 1 class. Once a child's program is discontinued, another child gets into the program.

The research that I've seen clearly indicates that if struggling readers and writers are left without individual special help even for a few weeks, it will be much harder to unlearn inefficient ways of responding to print. In addition, such children who find it difficult to respond to classroom literacy instruction will fall even further behind their average-performing peers.

Now, literacy is so important. I participate in reading week. I think this last year I was in the Edmonton public schools' and separate schools' reading week and spoke to something like 1,870 children and really take the idea of reading and literacy and all the rest of it very, very, very much as an important thing. I wonder if the minister could respond if this could ever be reinstated or if it's being looked at to have some greater emphasis on this particular area because it does hit on a very, very clear area.

Just two broad areas of questioning. One is the one on the vocational schooling and what we might be able to do to take some innovative ways to bring forward training and that. The other is on the innovative program, the reading recovery program.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, I'm not exactly familiar with the specific program that the hon. member refers to relative to the reading program. However, what I would suggest is that it is probably a particular program that a specific jurisdiction has decided to change direction on. I'll take it away and see if there's something that we could find for the hon. member. Again, one of the real strengths of our education system in Alberta is the fact that we do offer within various jurisdictions a wide variety and a lot of choice when it comes to specific programming and alternative programming. So we'll take a look at that and see if there's anything that I can add further.

The member commented a fair bit around the trades and the ability to ensure that students who may not necessarily be high academic achievers are recognized just as much as contributors to society going forward as those who are high academic achievers. I couldn't agree with him more. I think our challenge is to probably broaden the kinds of trades and skills that we offer in our post-secondary schools but also starting in our high school system.

I had the opportunity, the pleasure, actually, yesterday – and it's concluding today: the provincial skills competition, which is taking place at Northlands. To see the interaction between our post-secondary colleges and the high schools in terms of our skills competition is something that is quite eye opening. What is really interesting is that not all trades are heavy industrial. I mean, you've got everything from confectionery to trades around service in a restaurant. We need to look at how we can start to strengthen the

area of the service industry, to put more opportunities to have people trained better to enter the service industry and make it a career. Many people do make it a career, but it's training on the job, if you might, rather than any kind of a specific course that might be offered. So that's an area that we have to probably expand on.

I think there's another area that came to mind. I know that there's been a lot of comment and discussion around how much money we allow the horse-racing industry in this province to put back into that industry. There are, I'm told, some 8,000 employees who work in the equine industry who, probably, if it weren't for that industry, may very well not have a career. That's maybe another area where we should be looking at how we can encourage and have programming that would apply to industries such as that. So I think there are lots of opportunities to expand what we already offer. We offer very good high school CTS programming, but it can always be better, for sure.

I thank the hon. member for his comments.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you. Again, going back to the Minister of Education on three issues that I hear many, many times, over and over in my constituency. The home-schooling supports and the transportation busing agreement allocations: sometimes the home-schooling and the busing allocations go hand in hand. You know, we really celebrated with one of our school boards when we got our bus times down to two hours for students. In many of my 28 communities with 28 mayors and 28 councils and three schools boards, that all do great jobs for the community of Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, I hear this issue about the transportation funding and the cookie-cutter type of approach that our boards have to use. They're concerned that, you know, the one formula doesn't work for all. I'm just wondering if you're going to have an opportunity to review that funding formula so some of our schools can access the busing grants that they need to service the constituents of Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

As well, some years ago there was a study by the school building review committee, done by Jon Lord, Member for Calgary-Currie. In that there were some good suggestions that our government, the ministry of infrastructure and your ministry, could do. I thought it was quite a unique approach of having four or five schools pre-designed, pre-engineered, not with koi ponds and not with waterfalls and not with big glass mirrors, just some good, functional schools that we could move around in our province for communities in need. I think it could save us a lot of infrastructure dollars. I'm wondering what you're doing to promote that type of an idea just to try to stretch our dollar, get it into some more places and be a little more cost effective.

5:20

Again, I'd like to hear from the minister on the home-school supports and what he's doing with the home-schooling association and the many home-schoolers that sometimes are forced to try to bring education to their young families. You know, like I talked about, we celebrated the two-hour bus rides from two hours and 20 minutes. Still, if you have a kindergarten child or a grade 1 or grade 2 child, that's a long bus ride in the morning and then back at night, so some of those parents were really forced to teach their children through home-schooling and did a very admirable job, I must say, too. I'd like to hear from the minister on those comments.

Mr. Liepert: I'll try and address all three issues. Specifically with respect to home-schooling, I'm assuming that the hon. member is referring to the funding that's provided for home-schooling cur-

rently. There is a debate whether home-schooling should be funded at a higher level than it is today. I think there's also a debate whether private-school funding should be at a higher level than it is today. Those are all good debates that we want to take a serious look at over the next 12 months and see if our funding formula that exists today is still the right one for the year 2007-08 and beyond. I would just say that the whole area of funding, whether it's the funding framework that exists today or a different model, is something that I have committed to taking a look at, and I would include home-schooling in that.

Relative to busing, I've certainly met with school boards, and busing continually comes up. There are a couple of issues. One is the declining enrolment, so buses have to travel farther to pick up the same number of children. The other one, of course, is increased costs of such things as fuel prices. Now, we do have in place a fuel price contingency fund, which in this particular year is 15 and a half million dollars, for school boards. There's no question that busing continues to be an issue for school boards. Again, I would hope that that would be part of that overall look at funding.

I think the bigger issue around busing is really the amount of time that especially very young children are spending on school buses in some of our less populated and continually decreasing populated parts of the province. I would envision that there will be a day in the not-too-distant future when there will be areas of the province where children will actually go to school for only two days a week, maybe three days a week, because their bus ride will simply be an hour and a half or two hours one way.

That's where technology will come in for those other two or three days of the week. Students will have the opportunity to learn online. We simply are going to have to look at some of these alternative options because we have schools in remote areas of the province that have fewer than 20 students. It doesn't necessarily become a matter of dollars and cents; it becomes a matter of: can you attract teachers to those particular areas to provide the kind of education instruction that these students deserve?

I guess the third question that the hon. member asked was relative to a standard architectural design concept for new schools, and I think that has a lot of merit. One of the things that our new capital committee is going to be looking at, and there was a hundred million dollars put into the Department of Education budget this year specifically to sort of kick-start that initiative, is that we do take – and I don't know what the number will be – five, 10, 15, 20 schools that are actually the same design and locate them in the areas of need around the province. It seems to me that we've been spending way too much time and dollars on reinventing every school design. There are lots of school boards and parent groups that have ideas about what they would like their school to look like, but at the end of the day I don't think that we can afford to have that option much longer. There are some very good basic designs out there that function very well. So that's something that our new capital committee will clearly be looking at over the next few months.

I believe that answers the questions that were posed by the hon. member.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose.

Mr. Pham: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a few questions I would like to ask the Minister of Education. My questions will focus on three areas. The first one is ESL and ESL funding. Year after year I have seen that we recognize the need to have ESL teaching in school, and we have committed quite a bit of money in this area, but up to now I haven't seen a formal, standardized ESL program incorporated into the Alberta curriculum. This makes it

very difficult to compare and to see whether a student has achieved a certain level of English proficiency or not, and it also makes the job of the teachers a lot more difficult.

When a student is taking ESL courses, whether he takes them in Calgary or Edmonton, I expect that student should learn the same thing and should have the same set of skills that he's expected to acquire after he completes the course. Right now that is not the case. Even in the same school a student who takes ESL in two different classes can learn in a totally different way. I think it's about time that we move forward to standardize the ESL curriculums and make sure that they are considered as part of the formal curriculum. Credits should also be given to the students. That way it can help the student to complete their high school diploma within the time frame that they're expected to.

This ESL program can also be linked to the dropout rate. I know that there are quite a few ESL students that cannot complete high school within three or four years, and therefore they have to drop out. If you can look at a way to help bring them along and make sure that their ESL courses are recognized as part of their education, then that may help.

The second area I want to focus on is the achievement tests. The achievement tests were designed to be a kind of measurement of how well our students are doing in the system. In reality more and more schools are now adopting a very interesting policy. They ask the students who are not doing so well in school to skip these tests. The children who are not doing so well do not have a chance to participate. Therefore, I wonder whether the test results truly reflect the academic level of our students or not. I want the minister's comments in that area.

The third area I want to focus on is the technology in our schools. Our society has moved a lot in this area. The way many of us work today is totally different than the way we used to work, you know, 15 years ago because of computers, because of the Internet, but the way students are being taught in school hasn't changed that much. The level of technology introduced in school depends on the amount of money that the parents council can raise and depends on whether or not they have a good teacher in the school who knows the technology. There is absolutely no standard as to what level of technology proficiency the students are required to achieve in school. We should have standardized programs for computer skills. Especially, the students should be taught how to use the Internet to do research on their own. The traditional way of teaching, of making people memorize things, may not be the best way to move forward in the future. I think that it's very important for the student to learn how to do research on their own, how to learn on their own, to be an independent learner. That will be a lot more useful for the student in the future.

5:30

I would like to see the technology funding become a stand-alone item. With the evergreen plan, you're in for every school board in the province, and they should have technology plans that are practical, that can be useful and can be implemented right away.

Also, the Minister of Education should have the program reviewed and agreed to by the minister of advanced education because the teachers, those who are going to teach the students, should have the level of knowledge that is required for them to do these things.

Mr. Chairman, those are my comments, and I'll wait for the minister's reply.

Mr. Liepert: I'll try and address the three issues that were raised by the hon. member. I'll work backwards.

Relative to technology, we do have a standardized curriculum on technology, and we have standardized assessments. There is a fair

bit of discrepancy from school board to school board as to what is being taught, but the member makes a good point. I think, quite honestly, we're in the early stages of our technology development in our schools and exactly what it can accomplish.

We just launched within the last couple of months a pilot project. We committed \$4 million to this pilot project. We've got a number of schools in the province that each student in that particular class is being provided with a laptop, and they will be learning almost exclusively through the laptop method rather than textbook method. We'll see how that pilot project evolves and see where that leads us on technology.

I take the hon. member's comments relative to student achievement testing as good information. I'm not quite sure that I agree with him on all of his comments, but I will take it as information.

We continue to put significantly more money into ESL. We've increased the number of years that you're eligible to qualify for ESL funding from five to seven years, and it's our view that at the end of seven years every student taking ESL should be proficient in English as a second language.

One of the focuses that we tried to emphasize in our budget this year was the early ESL programs, especially for those who have mild and moderate learning disorders, because what we're faced with in our province today is not just an ESL issue but an issue that also in some cases is literally a social skills issue. Some of our new Canadians, some of our children are coming from situations where they've, frankly, never even learned the basics of life because they may have been born and have lived their entire life in a refugee camp. So those particular children need more than just ESL education. They need basic social skills plus the ESL. I think that even in ESL there's a lot of learning that's going on because our country, our province is changing so much, and the numbers of children that are taking advantage of our ESL programs continually evolve and change.

I thank the hon. member for his comments.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have some further questions of the Minister of Education. I was very concerned in looking at some of the research in the '04-05 report that said that 57 per cent was the transition rate from high school to postsecondary within just a few years. There's very much a degree of concern that that is so high.

I was also very interested in the minister's talk about other trades that may be trained to come in other than those in construction and such or those that are traditionally focused on as being shortages in our economy.

In Edmonton one of the most important industries is actually the equine industry, and a lot of people don't know that. The people who participate in jumping, the people who participate in many of the shows and stuff with horses, the horse racing, and other areas are important areas for our economy in Edmonton and are very important in terms of employment in northeast Edmonton, especially in my area. There are a number of different areas that people do train up in. Horse dentistry was the subject of a major Supreme Court challenge here just in the last few years.

I was at a meeting just outside of my constituency. My constituency of Edmonton-Manning is the largest rural riding in the city of Edmonton, by the way, and there are quite a number of agricultural endeavours. There are a fair number of horses, or there are a fair number of people that do take part in the equine-oriented types of practices. My constituency assistant, one of the part-time ones, is actually into show jumping, and she's on the student council of a

high school in my area. But horse dentistry, farriers, shearers, animal masseuses, groomers, veterinary assistants, different types of people who work in dressage and all the rest of it: these are actually important areas of training that would do well to come in at the grade levels in the schools. My question, I guess, again, in terms of types of learning other than academic is if these could be looked at, at least in the towns and such.

The various areas of social skills that the minister touched on. In my constituency of Edmonton-Manning there's a new thing in the last couple of years, a new organization called City Farm. It trains in short-term stints urban children with an understanding of agricultural skills that allow them to grow a crop for a little bit of time or to groom an animal or to do more than just be in a petting zoo. It's actually a very interesting and, I think, important addition to our urban landscape and the ability of kids in urban areas to learn about our agricultural practices and heritage.

That's just another aspect of that particular area that, you know, I'd like to mention, Mr. Minister, to see if you had any comments. Some of that is in Employment, Immigration and Industry, certainly, but training in it would also do well to begin at an earlier age.

Thank you.

Mr. Liepert: Well, just a quick comment. The member talked at the very beginning about our 57 per cent transition rate. I want to make sure that it's understood that that is the transition within four years from an Alberta high school to an Alberta postsecondary institution. So if someone decides to go to university in western Ontario, they are not included in that transition. I recognize that it's not a very accurate way of tracking our students, but the problem is that if somebody goes on a scholarship to the United States, we have no ability to track them. Our numbers that are, sort of – I wouldn't say that they're hard data, but when we do some backtracking on individuals from between the age of 24 and 35 who have taken some sort of postsecondary training, whether it be maybe even correspondence or gone to postsecondary institutions outside the province, it's actually closer to 80 per cent. You can always play with numbers however you want to play with them, but that number around our transition is not one that we should be using in a consistent way.

5:40

The Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be as quick as I can. I think there are only a few minutes left. My questions would be to the Minister of Children's Services. I wanted to continue a little bit on what I had started before about violence. Violence against women is widely regarded as an effort by men to control women and children. One of the goals, goal 1 of the Children's Services: I believe that will ultimately fail if it's not accompanied by efforts to advance gender equality. Part of my comments are based on the fact that Bill Clinton, Bill Gates, and Stephen Lewis have all said quite unequivocally that unless women are empowered, they will never be able to beat the AIDS scourge in Africa.

So a couple of my questions would be: whatever happened to the status of women department? My hon. colleague from Edmonton-Manning has pointed out that the trades are now saying that they want more women to be involved. I think that to get women more involved, I would like to see, perhaps, the status of women or some portion thereof to get women back because, as I said, it is important in terms of the gender equality.

The other thing is – this would be to the Minister of Education – would you consider adding gender/women's studies content to Alberta high school curriculum? I'm sure that my answer will be, "It would be up for debate," but I'd like to see that debate take place.

The Chair: Hon. members, I will now invite the officials to leave the Assembly so the committee can rise and report progress. I will allow the minister a moment while that's taking place to answer if she so wishes.

The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Tarchuk: No. I was just going to say that I know that we have another minister that's very interested in answering that part of that last question. I just wanted to point out that some of what the hon. member here was talking about had to do with the availability of child care spaces. I outlined the number of initiatives, good work that we're doing in that area.

The Chair: Pursuant to Standing Order 59.02(9)(a) the Committee of Supply shall now rise and report progress.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions for the departments of Children's Services, Seniors and Community Supports, and Education relating to the 2007-2008 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2008, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

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

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading
(continued)

Bill 33
Town of Bashaw and Village of Ferintosh
Water Authorization Act

[Adjourned debate May 9: Mr. Backs]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise again to speak to the Town of Bashaw and Village of Ferintosh Water Authorization Act. Again, I must commend the Member for Lacombe-Ponoka for all the work he did in providing information to me on a number of the questions regarding this bill prior to speaking to it in the House. It's a very important bill for the village of Ferintosh. It's their water. It's their future. It's their ability to do so many things. You know, Alberta has invested in the infrastructure of the town. The people have invested in their businesses, their homes, and their farms. It is very important to understand that in having water come to them from nearby areas – this is actually an interbasin transfer from south to north – these are good things in Alberta. I'm not so sure that I would be all in favour of transferring water down to California or something like that, but within Alberta we have these established infrastructures that are very important to maintain and towns that will be there for a long, long time. I've heard some people say that we should be moving people to water and depopulating certain areas of Alberta. I must say that I don't agree with that.

I am very pleased to support this bill, and I commend the member for bringing it forward. I ask that all members of this Assembly support it. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available for questions or comments if there are any.

Seeing none, anyone else wish to participate in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to make some brief comments on Bill 33, Water Authorization Act. This bill clearly will authorize the transfer of water from the South Saskatchewan River basin to the North Saskatchewan River basin to supply water from the town of Bashaw to the village of Ferintosh.

Currently, of course, we know that the reason the bill is required is that the transfer of water between major river basins has to be authorized while an act is to ensure that there is stability both environmentally and in terms of water availability. So this bill will authorize such transfer but limits it, clearly, to a certain amount at this point in time, 55.8 cubic decimetres, from the town of Bashaw to the village of Ferintosh because of a shortage of groundwater, and there are no other reasonable sources of water. Now, according to the village administrator Ferintosh needs some more water for economic growth and development specifically stemming from the sale of vacation property. So there's new, expanded economic activity envisaged in the area; hence the village administrator sees the need of additional water.

It is true that the village, in fact, currently trucks in water for the use of the very small population that the village has: about 200 people. The water diversion will represent a huge sort of injection to the life of the small community; there is no doubt.

In August 2006, Mr. Speaker, a Stantec report on the Ferintosh water supply recommended that water be transported from Bashaw since the groundwater supply was insufficient at Ferintosh. The surface water from the nearby lake, Beaver Lake, was undrinkable due to bacteriological contamination from the farming industry. The best thing to do was, of course, therefore, to pipe in water from Bashaw. However, the study also noted that the drinking water was not safe at Bashaw either and that it had not determined whether there was enough water at Bashaw to supply the village in any case. Additionally, Camrose county wants also to make an application for an interbasin transfer once the water supply is approved for Ferintosh.

5:50

From this cluster of information five issues arise: (a) larger industrial farming-related health problems regarding the safety of Beaver Lake, (b) the lack of safe groundwater at Bashaw, (c) the lack of environmental assessment regarding groundwater supply in the province, (d) interbasin water transfer from a river basin where new licences are prohibited due to groundwater conservation issues, and (e) a hidden water expansion agenda from Ferintosh to other areas that will sidestep environmental concerns.

Mr. Speaker, although the Ferintosh residents would appreciate water that comes there directly rather than having to have water trucked in – it must be expensive – it raises some issues. The bill is problematic, I'm arguing, for the following reasons. New licences are currently not being issued for the South Saskatchewan River basin because of groundwater availability concerns, but the bill seems not to address this fact properly and would authorize water transfers anyway. So this raises some concern.

Furthermore, the groundwater availability at Bashaw has not been established. The availability study should be done before money is allocated and water transported. The safety of the Bashaw water supply is a serious concern both for Bashaw and Ferintosh residents and should be looked into immediately. The bill, although well intended, does have serious ramifications which need to be addressed before this House authorizes this interbasin transfer as requested by our Bashaw and Ferintosh communities.

The interbasin transfer and prohibitions on it in our existing legislation are there for good environmental reasons. There is a need for us to be extremely cautious about opening this door which, I think for good reasons, was shut by the existing statutes and legislation given acknowledged and recognized environmental concerns. Once you establish a statutory precedent to now begin to allow interbasin transfers, all of those considerations, all of those concerns that were addressed in the existing statutes will have to be overlooked.

I don't think a case has been made, Mr. Speaker, at this point that will convince me that those considerations which were valid some years ago when that bill was before the House and was passed are no longer relevant or operational. Longer term environmental considerations must be taken into account, particularly in light of the fact that there is a very, very rapid economic growth under way in the province. Water resources are an extremely important asset that we have not only because some very crucial industries increasingly depend on their use – and I refer here to the tar sands project and how much water the production of each barrel of oil from that source uses to produce that one barrel – but also because water is, as we all know, the very basic fundamental condition for life. Quality of life is one of the key objectives of the new administration, as I understand it.

Mr. Speaker, imagine the next generation or generations beyond having to confront the problem of not having enough water for use

for the daily needs of regular living that we all have. Water is the source of life. Water is absolutely necessary in order for us to have sustainable communities, sustainable living conditions. Sustainability of life, in short, depends upon the sustainable availability of potable and good water.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, I think it is of the utmost importance that we in this Legislature take all the time and care that this issue requires and give thorough consideration to interbasin transfer requests and the legislation that will permit that sort of transfer to happen. I think we need to involve water resources experts. We have them around Alberta. At the local University of Alberta we have outstanding scientists who can provide advice as to the advisability of interbasin transfers, specifically the transfer of water requested as in this piece of legislation before the House.

If it were simply a limited issue of two communities and servicing their existing needs for water, it would be one thing, but it appears, Mr. Speaker, that that is not what the requirements of the area are going to be. The whole area seems to have ambitious plans for further economic development and growth, and that will require . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The Assembly stands adjourned until 7 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6 p.m.]

