

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: Monday, May 28, 2007

7:00 p.m.

Date: 07/05/28

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

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

head: **Main Estimates 2007-08**

The Chair: I'll invite the hon. Minister of Justice to provide his opening remarks.

Justice and Attorney General

Mr. Stevens: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's certainly my pleasure to be here this evening to present the budget of Alberta Justice to all of the members of the Assembly, who are obviously paying keen attention to what I'm about to say.

Before I start, however, I would like to introduce the members of my executive management team who are with us this evening both on the floor and in the balcony. I'll start with those in the balcony. In no particular order we have Sharon Lepetich, senior adviser to the deputy minister; Neil Dunne, acting assistant deputy minister, legal services division; Shawkat Sabur, senior financial officer and executive director, financial services; Sylvia Church, manager of business planning and corporate services; Kevin Quail, acting director of the maintenance enforcement program; Mark Cooper, director of communications; and Andrea Hennig, executive assistant to the minister.

At this particular point in time I have been asked by the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry that if there are any single men in the balcony, to please raise their hands. Seeing none, I will continue.

With me on the floor are Terry Matchett, my deputy minister, immediately to my right. Also to my right is Barb Hookenson, assistant deputy minister of court services, and to my immediate left is Greg Lepp, assistant deputy minister of criminal justice.

The Alberta Justice and Attorney General budget to be voted on for the 2007-2008 fiscal year is \$359 million. That's a net increase of \$15 million, or 4.4 per cent, over the 2006-2007 forecast, but if you take into account a decline of \$15 million in capital, it is actually an increase of some \$30 million in operating expense. The new funding will help Alberta's justice system respond to more cases and help improve public access to the courts.

In my comments I'll briefly highlight some of the initiatives we're working on in the ministry, and then I'd be pleased to address questions. I'll begin with initiatives that come under criminal justice. The overall purpose of the criminal justice division is to promote safe communities in Alberta by effectively conducting criminal prosecutions and striving for just outcomes. This year's budget for criminal justice is \$53.2 million, with a \$3.1 million increase.

A functioning justice system needs adequate resources to do the job. This year Alberta Justice will be adding 10 prosecutors and 12 support staff to help the system respond to more cases and improve public access to the courts. This is a total of 64 prosecutors and support staff added in the past two years. There will be five new family violence prosecutors, three new prosecutors to handle an increased caseload and megacases, one new prosecutor for the integrated market enforcement team, or IMET, and one new prosecutor dedicated to the education and training of our junior prosecutors.

Mr. Chairman, we're hiring the five new family violence prosecutors and associated support staff because this province has the highest rate of family violence in the country. I'm optimistic that the \$1 million we are allocating in new funding will contribute to breaking the cycle of family violence, and it will protect the safety and security of children, families, and communities.

Three new prosecutor positions are being added to manage the demands of megacases. These cases typically result in very lengthy and complex trials. Alberta Justice is currently working on two megacases: Project Kare, the task force investigating murdered and missing women, and Project Infiltrate, the mortgage fraud case investigated by the integrated response to organized crime unit, or IROC. They place considerable pressure on the prosecution services. They require several prosecutors to work on one case often for months or years. The addition of the new prosecutors will relieve this impact and enhance the ability to prosecute other serious and violent crimes.

Moving on to the court services division, court services promotes fair and equitable access to the justice system for all Albertans. This year's budget for the division is \$159.5 million, an increase of \$12 million. One of the major challenges court services is facing is that their major information systems are dated. These information systems are used by court administrators, Crown prosecutors, the judiciary, and ultimately they help the public's access to the justice system. Alberta Justice through the justice information management system, or JIMS, will convert mountains of paper into electronic information. This year \$2.5 million in new funding has been allocated to the JIMS project. Part of this funding will be used to cover project start-up costs for this multiyear project.

Another challenge in the justice system is the area of traffic tickets. An increased population and the Solicitor General's traffic enforcement initiative have resulted in more traffic tickets being issued. There is also an increase in the number of people challenging tickets in court. That means we need more people to process them. This year \$3.8 million has been allocated to deal with cost increases and to hire an additional 25 Provincial Court staff.

We also recognize that the justice system and, indeed, the government needs to pay competitive salaries to retain and recruit staff. With that in mind we accepted the recommendations of the 2006 Alberta Justice of the Peace Compensation Commission, and our budget reflects an additional \$216,000 for justices of the peace.

I'd like to turn now to the legal services division of the ministry, which provides effective legal and related services to government and other ministries. The budget for civil law is \$29.4 million for 2007-2008. Of this funding \$3 million will go toward dealing with complex aboriginal litigation against Alberta and aboriginal consultation matters. Another \$45.3 million will support the Legal Aid Society of Alberta. That's an increase of more than \$2.1 million. The additional funding will help Legal Aid handle the increased demand and continue to provide this important service to Albertans.

The Public Trustee administers the estates of dependent adults, decedents, and minors. This year's budget for the Public Trustee is \$12.8 million, with a \$700,000 increase to hire new staff.

The medical examiner's office investigates all unexplained deaths in Alberta. To keep pace with operating requirements as well as physician earnings and funeral director overhead in rural Alberta, the ME's office will require \$342,000 in new funding.

Dealing with the maintenance enforcement program, or MEP, this program ensures that individuals pay spousal and child support under the terms of their court orders and certain agreements. The program administers approximately 50,000 active cases and collects close to \$200 million on behalf of 65,000 Alberta children. This

year's budget is \$17 million. That is a \$2.1 million increase over last year's budget. Funding of \$1.6 million has been allocated for MEP to hire 18 additional collection officers.

The Alberta Crime Reduction and Safe Communities Task Force is a key mandate for this ministry; \$1.5 million dollars in new funding has been allocated to this important initiative. We're confident that community groups can help us identify successful strategies to get at the root causes of crime that can be shared or incorporated as best practices.

There are a couple of other areas that are receiving new money this year to support ministry initiatives. The ministry strategic leadership team works with Albertans and stakeholders to respond to key issues in the justice system. They will receive \$614,000 and six new staff this year. The bill forfeiture collection team ensures that money owing to the Crown is recovered if an accused breaches bail conditions. The budget includes \$500,000 and six new collection officers.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to turn now to this year's budget for staff in the Department of Justice. Alberta Justice has a manpower department employing mainly highly trained individuals. The services Justice provides are heavily dependent on the knowledge and skills of its staff. More than 65 per cent of the ministry's budget is allocated to manpower. In this budget there is an increase of \$5.7 million to manage inflationary pressures, including manpower. Funding of \$4.3 million has been allocated to address the ministry's capital requirements in 2007-2008.

7:10

The Calgary Courts Centre will open this summer on time and on budget. This year there is \$2.8 million in capital funding to complete the installation of technical infrastructure and equipment at the Courts Centre. This includes electronic evidence: video, audio, and computers.

Other capital investments in this budget include \$800,000 for the maintenance enforcement program to enhance its management information system and to upgrade its telecommunication system, and \$340,000 to replace obsolete lab equipment for the medical examiner.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, it's clear that we all share an interest in an efficient and effective justice system, and I know that the additional dollars that we are seeking in this year's budget will take us some ways towards that.

I'm happy now, Mr. Chairman, to take questions.

The Chair: It's the chair's understanding that both members have agreed to share the time back and forth, for the timekeeper's benefit.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Indeed, a pleasure for me to rise to respond to the hon. minister's moving of the estimates for his ministry, the Ministry of Justice. I want to start by thanking the hon. minister and his staff for their warmth and their receptiveness when I first became the shadow minister for his department and they invited me to go over the general background information with respect to the ministry. Then we met again after that before the commencement of this sitting of the Legislature to go over their legislative agenda. So I wanted to put on the record that I truly valued those two meetings. Hopefully, we can work together in the future again, be it the fall sitting or next year if we're both still members of this esteemed House.

I also want to welcome the staff who are in the gallery and the deputy minister and assistant deputy ministers on the floor of the Assembly. You know, I'm truly envious of the support that this

minister receives from his support people in his ministry. I have one researcher, and there's one of me, but we'll try to sound intelligent today, and we'll try to seek some answers to some of the questions that we have with respect to this budget. Now, I just have to emphasize that we don't have too much time, so I'm going to try to be brief. I know the minister in his eloquent way is going to give us the answers that we're seeking in short sentences, please.

I'm not going to repeat some of the numbers or percentages that the minister mentioned. Generally, I like the direction that we're increasing funding for court services because there is definitely a higher workload on the part of the courts, and we need quicker justice. I've always maintained that quick justice is good justice; slow justice is bad justice. Definitely the workload is increasing. The minister mentioned something like traffic ticket processing and the fact that more people are contesting, you know, or questioning those traffic tickets and are fighting them in court and so on and so forth. We definitely need to address this increased workload, so that's a direction I like.

Also, funding for legal services is going to increase for the hiring of more Crown prosecutors, civil lawyers, and support staff, and on top we're also adding funding for maintenance enforcement, which is an issue, really, that I have many comments with respect to. So, again, that's a good direction.

The one number that I'm going to mention is the \$1.5 million that has been allocated for the Crime Reduction and Safe Communities Task Force. Time and time again in this House, Mr. Chairman, we talked about this developing trend, that this government seems to like task forces and commissions and, you know, fact-finding gatherings where they tour the province, listen to stakeholders and experts, and come back, prepare a report, and the report is given to the relevant minister, and then end of story. We don't know what happens.

So I'm going to ask the minister: with respect to this \$1.5 million what was the minister hoping to learn that we haven't heard before? We've all heard, you know, the same concerns with respect to drugs, prostitution, domestic violence, gangs. Not to sound like some of the people that are always criticizing, voicing those alarms and raising these flags, we know that there is also an underlying component, be it education, be it poverty. So it's not just a law enforcement issue. Really, what was the minister hoping to hear by putting together this Crime Reduction and Safe Communities Task Force? We've heard from our hon. colleague from Calgary-Varsity today, who really questions the merit of having task force after task force, and there doesn't seem to be any eagerness on the part of the government to listen to the recommendations by those different task forces.

The other question with respect to that exercise is: how much of this \$1.5 million went to or will go to the MLA from Calgary-Fish Creek, who chaired the task force, if in fact she receives any compensation? I wanted to know if some of that money was earmarked for her chairing the task force. Also, wasn't she the Solicitor General herself at one point in the past? What was the hope for that new information that she would now learn versus her time at the helm of that ministry in particular?

Lastly, does the minister agree that this money could have been better spent on actual law enforcement versus what I think was a public relations exercise; that is to say, maybe hiring 15 or 20 beat officers on the streets and playgrounds in Edmonton and Calgary, for example? Now, I know that the minister has all the details and has all the background information. He might question me on where I'm coming up with the 15 or 20. I don't know. I think a good beat officer in Edmonton or Calgary or Red Deer, the bigger centres, would probably cost the system somewhere between \$90 grand and

\$100 grand. I don't know, and I don't profess to know. What I'm thinking is that however many we can get on the streets is probably a better solution in terms of law enforcement right there. I know that any money is welcome, and I know that any increase in the number of officers patrolling and policing our communities would be welcomed by those communities.

This is my first launch into this debate, Mr. Chairman, and I am interested in hearing the minister's comments. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. To the Member for Edmonton-McClung, thank you very much for the complimentary introductory comments, in particular with respect to the support I have as Minister of Justice and Attorney General. You're quite right: you should be envious. I have professional people around me who do a very good job indeed. We have great challenges, but they lessen the burden, without doubt.

On the Crime Reduction and Safe Communities Task Force I would remind the hon. member of a community meeting that both he and I attended at MacEwan College. I believe it was in February of this year. I was on the stage as part of the panel addressing, generally, community crime issues along with Chief Boyd of the Edmonton police force. What I recall Chief Boyd saying at that point in time, among other things, was that the justice system is ill-equipped to address all of the issues associated with criminal matters. The criminal justice system essentially is a catch basin. The police and the prosecutors and the court system deal with people after they have committed the crime, and if we are going to address the issue of crime reduction and if we are going to address the issue of safe communities, we have to do something different than what we are doing.

Let me be the first to say that we will probably continue to increase, as we are this year, the number of prosecutors, as the Solicitor General in his budget likely will be doing in increasing the number of police officers, because we do have issues out there on the street that require what I would consider to be the standard way of addressing criminal matters, and that is catching the perpetrators and prosecuting them successfully. The other thing is that crime is becoming far more complex, and in fact it takes more people to do those things.

So that part is still part of it, but the crime reduction task force itself is trying to address two or three things that I think are absolutely essential for us. First of all, what they're asking for are best practices in communities as they go around Alberta. As you know, they've been to 14 communities throughout the province. They want to know what the community is doing, what has worked so that they can share this best practice. We firmly believe – I firmly believe – that it is the community that is going to be the best indicator of the problem and how to solve the problem. So that's very, very important information.

7:20

Secondly, from my perspective, the communities can give us some assistance in ordering the information that we have, prioritizing, if you will, where we should be putting our efforts. There's absolutely no doubt that there's a plethora of information with respect to the issue of what causes crime. Indeed, I believe the hon. member knows that as a government, going back to the spring of last year, we established a cross-ministry initiative called the crime reduction strategy task force, which involved, I believe, some 13 ministries.

That came about as a result of the deputy ministers identifying that something had to be done before the catch basin, if you will. As a

government that particular committee started a literature search of all of the literature that was created up until this point in time. There is no doubt that there is a lot of it, but you have to pick and choose where you are going to go, and I think that this work of the task force committee will assist us in picking the top priorities that we as a government can address.

I can tell the hon. member that I met with the task force in Calgary when they were in their last of the 14 meetings this past Wednesday, and each and every one that I spoke to said: "Thank you. We have learned a great deal. We are going to be able to produce a report that we believe will be of value to Albertans." All I can say to the hon. member – I have not been to the 14; I have only appeared at two briefly – is that the people who are in fact doing the work are very optimistic that they will be able to produce something that we in this House will be able to receive and work with in a productive way to make the communities in our province safer.

We will provide you with a breakdown of the expenses as we know them. At this particular point in time it's an ongoing exercise, so they will not have all been expended. I do not expect the report until later in the summer. Going forward, we have in the latter part of June a two-day symposium in Calgary, which, of course, has not yet occurred.

From my perspective, hon. member, it is important to do this task force. The \$1.5 million, which is a one-time expenditure, I think will prove to be money well spent. It is not ongoing, so you can't equate it to X number of police officers in the long term. It's one-year spending. This is all there's going to be. I hope to be able to show you a report in the not-too-distant future, one which we both will be able to agree will be of some assistance in making our communities safer.

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the minister for offering that reply. Moving on, I mentioned briefly in my introductory remarks the maintenance enforcement program. I know that every member in this House receives numerous calls from constituents who are concerned about this program and how effective it is. I should really start by saying that it's not really a question of whether or not staff are doing a good job with the resources that they have. In fact, most of them that I myself individually or my assistant in the constituency office spoke to have been quite eager to help and quite efficient in their daily doings.

In the estimates on page 247, line item 3.0.5, we're talking about \$16.9 million, up from last year's forecast of \$14.8. I think it's really a small amount. I think any improvement is great, and any improvement is welcomed. It's just surprising that with all the information that we're receiving as MLAs – and the minister, no doubt, is as well – and numerous media accounts of difficulties parents are having with the maintenance enforcement program in general, this seems to be a very small increase.

Can the minister tell us how many new collection officers this will translate into? How many will be hired? Will this be enough to ensure that MEP, the maintenance enforcement program, is effective in locating and securing funds for Alberta families? Are there enough staff currently to deal with the increasing number of files that they deal with, and is this money going to only replace staff that are retiring, or are we, in fact, adding new staff to this program?

The other question, in general terms, would be on interjurisdictional co-operation between the provinces and territories when you have, Mr. Chairman, a deadbeat parent basically jumping from province to province, trotting, to avoid paying to support his or her children. What is the money in the program currently going to do in

terms of co-operation between the provinces and preventing that from being used as a way out for deadbeat parents, you know, parents who don't want to support their own children, which in my opinion is one of the lowest and most disgusting crimes? In general terms, maintenance enforcement is a big issue, and it seems to be a small amount. Can the minister explain: if it's only this much, why?

Mr. Stevens: Well, thanks to the hon. member. You're quite right: maintenance enforcement is a very important area. They have a very busy workload. A great deal of stress is associated with the job because the clients are often waiting for dollars or having difficulty coming up with them. So you're absolutely right about that. The funding of \$1.6 million of that amount has been allocated to 18 additional collection officers, which is actually a significant number.

I can tell the hon. member that like probably most ministers that appear at budget time, we would like and think we could in a perfect world justify more dollars with many of the programs, perhaps all of the programs that we have. I know that in Justice maintenance enforcement is one of those areas where we could spend more. We have other initiatives that we could embark upon, perhaps as pilots, or we would be able to put additional staff into the field. So you're quite right: you can always deploy more. But we feel that this is a significant number of dollars and a significant increase in collection officers to address the issue.

Yes, we are working with other jurisdictions relative to collection of dollars. In fact, we continue to expand that all of the time and from my perspective are doing a reasonably good job in getting dollars in Alberta for other jurisdictions and getting, through co-operation of other jurisdictions, dollars for children here in Alberta.

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Moving on, I wanted to briefly touch on the extra allocation for enhanced prosecutor services, the hiring of additional Crown prosecutors and staff to assist them. We also know that many experienced provincial Crown attorneys in Edmonton and Calgary have either retired or have signalled their intention to retire either last year or this year. We know that in the past 18 months some 29 prosecutors in Edmonton and 26 in Calgary have reportedly left general prosecutions.

Can the minister tell us if his ministry is hiring enough prosecutors to replace the experienced ones who have left? In other words, are we going to see an increase in the overall number of prosecutors, or are we only replacing the ones who left via attrition? Can the minister tell us what he is doing to ensure that more senior prosecutors remain in the role as Crown attorneys? One would definitely reach the conclusion that as these new ones come in, maybe they don't have the expertise or the experience to handle complex and difficult cases, so to give them time to gain that experience, I think we should retain some of the veterans, if you will. So that's a question in terms of: how many new ones are being added, and how many of the old ones are we replacing?

Mr. Stevens: Well, clearly, we've been adding to the budget for additional Crown prosecutors. I believe that in the last two years we've added 20 to 25 new positions in the budget. This year it is 10. As people retire, they are still in the budget, and we would be replacing those.

I can tell you that recently I answered a question on this in the House, and at that time I indicated that, yes, we have lost people to the private sector. Yes, we have lost prosecutors to retirement. Yes, we have had prosecutors go from general prosecution into special prosecution, so you go from doing everything into, perhaps, one of

these specialized areas. But the average experience is 11 years at this point.

7:30

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. minister, but the time for this item has elapsed.

We'll now proceed with the Department of Solicitor General and Public Security. I will invite the hon. Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security for his opening remarks.

Solicitor General and Public Security

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to present an overview of the Alberta Solicitor General and Public Security estimates and the 2007-2010 business plan.

Before I begin, I'd like to introduce staff from my ministry and the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission. Those with us here today are Eric McGhan, Deputy Solicitor General and Deputy Minister of Public Security; Bruce Anderson, assistant deputy minister, correctional services division; Brian Skeet, assistant deputy minister, public security division; Jim Bauer, senior financial officer; Norm Peterson, CEO of the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission. In the members' gallery joining us soon will be my executive assistant, Maureen Geres, and Andy Weiler, director of communications.

Mr. Chairman, over the next 10 minutes I'll provide you with highlights of the services and supports that the Solicitor General and Public Security provide to Albertans. I'll also provide an overview of the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, which now falls under my ministry. Following my presentation, I'd be pleased to answer questions that may remain. If we run out of time, I'll be happy to provide responses in writing.

In regard to our business plan Solicitor General and Public Security's vision is to ensure that Albertans have safe and secure communities in which to live, work, and raise their families. Every day we strive to achieve this vision by providing Albertans with services and supports in the areas of policing and crime prevention, corrections, and assistance to victims. We have eight goals that lead the programs identified in the business plan. They are to provide leadership in law enforcement to promote safe communities, ensure that crime prevention and community safety programs are in place to promote safe Alberta communities, provide secure and efficient custody and community supervision, ensure that offenders have the opportunity to access rehabilitative services and programs, ensure the safety of Albertans by providing government security services and crisis management planning, victims of crime will receive assistance information and support, Alberta's liquor industry operates with integrity, and Alberta's gaming industry operates with integrity, social responsibility, and benefits Albertans.

In regard to our finances Solicitor General and Public Security's 2007 budget has increased \$49 million over last year's comparable forecast, to \$506 million. Our booming economy continues to attract people and families from across Canada looking for a better future. Our province has a population of more than 3.3 million, and it is projected to continue to rise by 1.5 per cent per year. Unfortunately, we are not only attracting hard-working families but criminals looking to cash in on a hot economy.

In an effort to ensure that our communities are safe and secure, we have increased funding for public security by \$29 million over last year's comparable forecast, to over \$286 million. We will increase funding to our provincial policing programs by \$11.5 million, to \$162.5 million, to cover the full-year cost for 80 RCMP officers that were added in '06-07 and to address other inflationary costs. We will be adding 14 additional RCMP officers who will be dedicated

to six First Nations communities. We will increase municipal policing grants by \$1.3 million, to almost \$47 million.

We also continue our relentless battle against the spread of organized crime in Alberta. Drug dealing, identity theft, prostitution all have ties to organized crime. We will spend \$17.7 million this year in support of several specialized units that aggressively target criminal networks to disrupt and dismantle those operations.

With more and more people travelling on Alberta highways, we need to ensure that they get where they're going safely. Enforcement is an essential element of the government's traffic safety plan. Last fall we trained 39 sheriffs in traffic enforcement, and they now patrol provincial highways, targeting aggressive drivers and speeders. Our sheriffs have handed out almost 25,000 tickets and have helped take more than 50 impaired drivers off our roads between September of last year and the end of April this year. Budget '07 provides \$7.5 million for an additional 42 sheriffs, who will be on the highways this summer. In fact, the first class of 20 new recruits hit the highways on the May long weekend.

Mr. Chairman, everything police do now faces greater scrutiny by the public, who have more access to information than ever before. We have allocated \$3.8 million to establish the Alberta serious incident response team. This new investigative agency, to be headed by a civilian director, will investigate allegations of a serious or sensitive nature relating to the actions of a peace officer or incidents where the direct actions of a police officer may have resulted in serious injury or death.

We also received \$1.4 million to establish a warrant apprehension unit. As of December 2006 there were approximately 165,000 outstanding arrest warrants in Alberta, close to 8,000 of them for serious and violent crimes. Two teams of sheriffs, located in Edmonton and Calgary, will work closely with corrections staff and police to bring these fugitives to justice. Once caught, these fugitives will end up in one of our department's correctional centres. In Budget '07 we will spend \$176 million to operate correction services programs, including eight adult and three young offender facilities, four correctional camps, 41 community correction offices, and two attendance centres for adults and youth.

It is no secret that we are experiencing serious overcrowding issues in our remand centres. We will spend \$6.3 million this year on our interim solution to overcrowding at the Edmonton Remand Centre. Until a new, larger facility can be built, we are transferring inmates to various correctional facilities, including the Grande Cache federal institution. The \$6.3 million will be used to hire 70 additional staff, including 56 corrections staff and 14 sheriffs, cover transportation costs between facilities, and cover per diem costs to the federal government.

Our responsibility encompasses not only institutional programs but community correction programs, which involve supervising offenders in our communities. As part of Alberta's strategy for prevention of family violence and bullying, we're allocating \$1.3 million to hire additional probation officers. Their job will be to help break the cycle of family violence by ensuring appropriate supervision of offenders who will live in our communities.

We have also budgeted \$2 million to complete our comprehensive court security program and \$2.5 million to continue to develop our \$100 million information technology strategy announced last year.

Preventing crime is just as important as solving crime. To that end we've allocated \$1.7 million to crime prevention in Budget '07, including almost a million dollars in grant money for community-based crime prevention and restorative justice initiatives.

We're also spending almost \$18 million to support victims of crime through grants for agencies and groups that work with victims and financial assistance for those who have been victimized.

Under gaming and liquor, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission now falls under the Solicitor General and Public Security's mandate. We will ensure that the economic impact of gaming and liquor activities are maximized to the benefit of all Albertans. Having said that, much of the AGLC work is focused on social responsibility. We ensure that Albertans have the tools and programs to make informed choices about liquor and gaming and know where to get help if needed.

Money that the government receives from VLTs, slot machines, and ticket lotteries is placed in the Alberta lottery fund. This year lottery fund payments will total \$1.45 billion. Every year thousands of volunteer, public, and community-based initiatives benefit from the ALF for a variety of projects and initiatives. Some examples include community facilities, libraries, museums, athletic events, major exhibitions, arts and cultural groups, seniors' groups, and historic resources. The types of public initiatives that use these funds include building new schools, health facilities, and maintaining our roads. To assist government in making policy decisions, we will continue to provide \$1.5 million to the Alberta Gaming Research Institute this year.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my opening remarks. I welcome any questions that the opposition may have.

Thank you.

7:40

The Chair: Hon. minister, the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung has indicated his desire to share the floor back and forth as provided under Standing Order 59.01(2). Is that agreeable to you?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank the hon. minister and his staff and the deputy ministers and the program heads and the people in the gallery as well for agreeing to accompany us as we walk through this estimate and to provide the hon. minister with his background information and all the stuff he needs to answer our questions ever so eloquently.

I also want to thank him for meeting with me when he took over as the Solicitor General after the latest cabinet change and also again for meeting with me afterwards when we were discussing the legislative agenda. I want to comment on his willingness to share information and his willingness to allow his staff to be receptive to the requests from the Official Opposition. In that regard, I want to put that on the record and thank him sincerely.

The other thing I wanted to thank him very briefly for is the visit to the Edmonton Remand Centre, which he cohosted with the Minister of Justice, and allowing myself and my colleague from Edmonton-Glenora to tour the Remand Centre and speak to some of the guards and employees there and also to have a very brief visit with some of the inmates. Now, my kind request, which is going to follow from there, is for the hon. minister to organize a visit for myself and my colleague from St. Albert to hopefully visit Kennedale school in the north end of Edmonton. It's one of those institutional schools under his purview. I have to tell him that I tried to secure that visit on my own, and I was told that the hon. minister's approval is necessary. Perhaps it's for security purposes or it's protocol. So here is my new request, and hopefully, if he grants this one, I might think of a third one later.

Moving on to the budget, Mr. Chairman, first of all I want to do as the minister did and thank my researcher for coming up with the information and background research on this estimate. Without him, honestly, I can't conduct myself as effectively in this House as the shadow member for the Solicitor General.

My first series of questions are going to be talking about police funding. Definitely this should come as no surprise to the hon. minister. We've had some exchanges in question period on this very subject, and I bet he's also aware of some concern in the community, outside of this House. Agencies like the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association and different community groups are highlighting the fact that the police funding formula doesn't seem to be as equitable or as fair as it once was, perhaps.

I would argue that a main area of concern in maintaining safe and secure communities as per the minister's mandate is the issue of police funding. It's an area that has not received a significant increase over the last number of years. The provincial policing program, which pays for the full-time costs of RCMP officers in Alberta, has received a very modest boost, in my opinion, from \$151 million last year to \$162 million this year. This area of RCMP funding and an increase in the numbers doesn't really show, in my opinion, a strong commitment to having more RCMP officers in our communities.

To be fair, Mr. Chairman, this was not the case in 2005, where the government reacted to the tragedy in Mayerthorpe. We saw a significant increase. I honestly can't remember if I participated in that debate then, but I know that I was very supportive of that direction, and I know that my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Glenora was as well. However, it was reactionary. We would like to see a commitment reflected in the budget every year in terms of RCMP funding.

Rural communities, which are served by the RCMP, have expressed certain concerns, and most of the concerns stem from the funding formula applying to different communities having different population sizes. The province's funding formula for communities of up to 5,000 is one way, and then between 5,000 to 20,000 is another way. The 5,000 to 20,000 increment provides for a base payment of \$200,000 annually plus an additional \$8 per capita. I would argue, again, that this is not enough to pay for true policing costs in rural Alberta. We know that there has been a documented trend now for certain criminal activities and organized crime to move into rural areas because they think policing there is less and weaker. So I'm interested in hearing the hon. minister's thoughts in terms of this particular issue.

Now, I know that we're told in this House that any minister in any department goes to his caucus and his cabinet meetings and asks for money for his or her programs, but if all of them ask for a ton of money for all their programs, then we are not going to have a budget; we're going to break the bank. My question is: did the minister, in fact, ask for the funding formula to be improved and was turned down in cabinet? Or should I stay tuned? Is there something happening next year that I'm not aware of? If he can commit today to doing that, then, you know, maybe it will be a good sign of things to come. But it is definitely clear that the funding formula as it is now is totally inadequate, and I want to know where this minister wants to take this particular issue.

The other question is in terms of the RCMP negotiating their contract in the near future. I want to know where the minister is with respect to this particular file and if even informal negotiations or contacts have been started with the RCMP. Maybe a quick update from the minister would be tremendously appreciated. That's the second question.

The third question would be if the minister has given any thought to a graduated funding formula. As the community increases in size, as the population grows, maybe we should have an escalating formula like a graph or a chart – basically a community under 5,000 is this way; a community between 5,001 and, say, 7,500 is this way; 7,501 to 10,000 is this way; and so on – to try to make it more fair

and more equitable instead of a one-size-fits-all. Again, if the minister can shed some light on this, it would be greatly appreciated.

I'll take my seat and listen attentively. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you. First of all, I want to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung for his kind comments – I certainly have enjoyed working with him – and his comments regarding my staff. I certainly believe that I do have the best staff in the government. I want to also commend the hon. member for his dedication to fulfilling his role. He's taken it upon himself to come and tour, as he mentioned, the remand centre, and I might as well let the hon. member know that I'd be pleased to approve a visitation by the hon. member to any facility that's managed by my ministry. So let's get together, and we'll set something up.

The hon. member spoke about our RCMP officers and the reason why we didn't have a huge increase this year. I want to let the hon. member know that we do have 14 new members who are coming to patrol our aboriginal communities, and that is going to free up some of the members who are currently working in detachments to provide more of their time patrolling off those aboriginal communities.

I would also like to mention that the hon. member mentioned a number that we increased our numbers by in the last couple of years. Well, unfortunately, we're still short approximately 80 of the positions that we requested from the RCMP, so until they have an opportunity to catch up on that, we felt that it would be better to put our resources into other areas, which we've done.

7:50

In regard to municipal police funding, as the hon. member mentioned, when urban municipalities exceed 5,000, they become responsible for their own policing costs. Our grant covers as much as 44 per cent of those costs for municipalities with a population of over 5,000 to 20,000, and the amount that we pay actually averages 24 per cent. Our department is exploring options to modify the policing grant formula and to provide greater support to municipalities when their population does exceed 5,000. We recognize that any modification within the \$46 million grant envelope will mean redistribution of those funds.

The hon. member had asked if I'd run anything by my colleagues and been turned down. No, that certainly has not been the case. We are reviewing, as I mentioned, our options, and we will take those to our caucus and ask for their input and support. I would also encourage the hon. member that if he has some ideas, which he spoke to, we certainly will consider those as well.

I want to mention that municipalities also benefit from policing in regard to some of our departmental initiatives, such as ALERT, which is designed to attack serious and organized crime in Alberta. We invest over \$17.7 million in that, and that includes such things as the IROC, the integrated response to organized crime; ICE, the integrated child exploitation initiatives; and Project Kare.

I also want to let the hon. member know that our sheriffs highway patrol program, which complements enforcement efforts by the RCMP on provincial highways, also allows the RCMP to focus their attention on a lot more serious crime issues. This year we have put an extra \$7.5 million in our budget to enhance our sheriffs program. Policing is all about working more effectively and efficiently and getting outside of our silos and working in unison with the other agencies. Again, our sheriffs program working with the RCMP is an excellent example of how we're doing that, and we're actually having great results with that in regard to patrolling our highways and increasing highway safety.

I want to mention to the hon. member that Alberta is the only jurisdiction I'm aware of in Canada which actually returns fine revenues to municipalities. I believe it was in 2006 that there was approximately \$90 million that was turned back to the municipalities, which, again, assists them in their policing costs.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I believe I've answered the questions.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think the natural progression from here would actually take us to, again, police funding but this time for cities that are over 100,000, the bigger centres: Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, Fort McMurray, places like that. The funding formula, as I understand it, for communities over 100,000 is simple: \$16 per capita, and it's a flat rate. The funding for this comes from line item 2.2.4 in the estimates, which is virtually unchanged from last year. It has only risen by \$600,000 between 2007-08 and last year's forecast. For Edmonton and Calgary what this means is that they are now receiving virtually the same amount of funding, but we know that this is despite the fact that there is more crime. Crime seems to be on the rise in terms of violence, in terms of frequency, in terms of sophistication. There are issues with drugs, there are issues with gang activity, and so on.

Again, it's wonderful on the one hand to have mandate letters and to have stated policy directions that, you know, this government is going to be tough on crime, but this commitment has to translate into numbers in the budget. We have to take it a step further from talking about it to really implementing it. So \$600,000, I would argue, is really, really minimal, Mr. Chairman. For 2008 the city of Calgary, for example, will receive \$15.8 million, up from last year's \$15.2, which is that \$600,000 which I mentioned. The city of Edmonton has the same amount of money. There has been no increase.

I understand that this minister makes decisions in terms of the province in general. You know, he worries about Alberta in general, and I do too. But the city of Edmonton, in which I represent one of its constituencies, has increased in population. The latest estimate, the most conservative estimate is that we've exceeded 1 million people already. I know that in my own constituency of Edmonton-McClung we have added at least 4,500 people since the last election. I need an explanation from the hon. minister why this particular area of policing did not receive the attention it deserves. The bigger cities are growing at a faster pace than our smaller communities and our rural centres, so why did this not translate into this budget this year?

Strategy 1.2 of the business plan under the ministry's goal 1 clearly states that the ministry will provide leadership to ensure safe and secure communities and that they will ensure effective policing through the provision of various programs. Now, I know that the minister had mentioned in his first reply that, you know, we're always behind because now we're missing 80 RCMP officers, so until we catch up, there's bound to be some concern. He's going to field those concerns and those complaints from myself and from this side of the House and potentially from his own caucus colleagues as well. Until we catch up, until we add on the 80 RCMP officers and then re-evaluate the situation, what other programs is the minister talking about in terms of improving policing services in Alberta's bigger centres like Edmonton and Calgary?

Before I take my seat again, I just want to clarify where the minister stands on the issue of supplementing traditional policing services with the use, now, of sheriffs as per the sheriffs department under his authority. Is it only a cost-saving measure? How complementary are they? We know that the RCMP are happy to

work with sheriffs and to facilitate and co-operate between themselves and the sheriffs department. But why the move to now utilize more of the sheriffs services versus traditional RCMP, and what is the obstacle to hiring more RCMP officers notwithstanding the fact that the bigger centres have their own police departments as well?

That's that, and I'm going to reference some communities in particular which seem to be feature communities for this extended or expanded role of those sheriffs, communities like St. Paul, Cold Lake, and Grande Prairie, for example. Again, we've heard some of these concerns attending Alberta Urban Municipalities Association meetings or even the AAMD and C meetings that actually happen every year throughout the province.

Funding for the bigger centres and the mechanism whereby sheriffs and the RCMP work together is an area of interest for myself, and I would appreciate the minister's response to this one.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again, the hon. member mentioned earlier the RCMP contract and the status of those negotiations. I just want to let the hon. member know that those negotiations are with the federal government, and all provinces and territories are involved in those negotiations; it's one contract that covers all of Canada. We will certainly have our input into that, and we're actually kicking off those negotiations now in the sense that we're preparing all of our information so that we're in a position to make sure that we get a good contract for Albertans. We will soon be talking with our counterparts from across the country to hear what their thoughts are in regard to renewing this contract as well and then also, of course, sitting down with the federal government to kick off these negotiations.

In regard to the larger cities and the \$16 per capita the increase that occurred this year, of course, is strictly for population growth. I know that the AUMA had put in a request for a different formula, increasing it, I believe it was, to \$32 per capita. Well, our estimates indicate that that would have had an additional cost of \$60 million. We feel we could spend that kind of money better on some of our other initiatives where we work co-operatively with all of the agencies. An example I would use would be our new IT program. That's a hundred million dollar program where we will make sure that all policing agencies share the same data, and that's certainly going to help them work a lot more efficiently and effectively and also improve the safety of not only the officers but of the public. It'll be a great assistance to apprehending those criminals.

8:00

Another initiative that we're working on is a first responder radio system for the entire province, which will put a radio system in place that will allow the police and fire departments and the ambulances to communicate in a much more efficient manner than they are now.

A couple of other areas where we're investing money to improve policing are two warrant apprehension teams that we're putting together. We have a large number of outstanding warrants in the province. These people don't just stay in one jurisdiction. They move around, so it's important that we have a mobile apprehension team who can follow these people around and work with our law agencies to ensure that we get those folks behind bars, where they belong. We're working on a surveillance team as well to ensure that we can track in a lot more efficient manner the activities of organized crime in our province because again they do not stay in one municipality, so it makes it difficult for one police agency to track the activities. Again, if we have teams that can move around the province and follow those activities more closely, we believe that that's going to go a long way to reducing and fighting crime.

The member talked about the sheriffs and the reasons for putting that program in place. Our sheriffs are peace officers. They have expanded authority based on their level of training. The additional responsibilities they have taken on recently: traffic surveillance, our response to gaps in service delivery that we believe can be filled with an appropriately trained and directed peace officer rather than using a full-fledged police officer. Police services are experiencing significant recruiting and retention issues, and the solution that we are offering with our sheriffs allows them to focus their resources on a lot more serious matters without a drop in service.

The member also spoke about costing. Well, an RCMP officer costs the province in the neighbourhood of \$150,000* per man, and we can provide the services that we do with our sheriffs for approximately \$85,000. So there is a cost saving there. Again, their role is limited, but for the work they're doing, they are very well trained and just doing an excellent job.

I believe, Mr. Chairman, that answers the questions of the hon. member.

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Moving on and staying on the subject of peace officers and sheriffs, can the minister provide more clarification to the House regarding the training that sheriffs are receiving before they are allowed to conduct traffic stops on highways? We know that for the training they receive, they do good work, and this is reflected in the budget increase of about 7 and a half million dollars from last year's estimates, basically because they conduct, you know, traffic enforcement on provincial highways under the traffic safety plan.

But there is a concern that has been raised not just by the opposition but also by police officers themselves who indicate that the minister may want to ensure that these sheriffs can perform those functions but not jeopardize the safety of themselves or the public. Now, you know, stopping a racing car or pulling over somebody who appears to be under the influence are scary situations, I would argue, and we have to remember that sometimes there is something called road rage. Sometimes tempers fly high, and then these sheriffs are armed. They have side arms. So what training do they get to not put themselves in danger and also not to endanger innocent civilians? This is a very specific and serious concern which we have, and it was also raised by some members of the police. The training should reflect this safety component, and law enforcement, in my opinion, is primarily about safety, safety for the people who actually enforce the law and then also safety for the people who are either being questioned by law enforcement officers or innocent bystanders, like I mentioned.

The other question would be their training in terms of their primary duties. Do they receive any scenario training, or are they given examples of things they might encounter in real life, and how are they trained to defuse situations? How are they trained to try to talk somebody out of committing a crime on the spot, you know, the point control tactics training? I'm not an expert, and I don't even try to become one, but how do they defuse these situations, and how do they receive the training that allows them to deal with these scary scenarios and not use force except as a last resort? So physical training, situation training. I'm not sure if they also receive some basic psychiatric techniques that they can use to defuse situations. Any information from the minister would be greatly appreciated.

My overarching argument – and I would like to be corrected if I'm mistaken – is that they don't receive the same level of training as a full-fledged police officer. Are we asking them to perform a full-fledged police function without affording them the necessary

training in full? So that's my question, and again I would cede the floor to the minister to respond.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you. First of all, I want to clarify the response I gave previously where I indicated that RCMP officers cost \$150,000. That's what they cost, but our share is 70 per cent, so it's around \$109,000.*

In regard to the question around training of our sheriffs they receive 200 hours of safety training. Traffic training is another 200 hours. They have field training on top of that. I want to assure the hon. member that our sheriffs are trained to a higher level for traffic than most front-line police officers, and I also want the hon. member to know that our sheriffs do not do high-speed pursuits. Their use of force training is the same as the police follows, the AACP use of force continuum. Their responsibility covers enforcement of the highway traffic act, the liquor control act. If they see a Criminal Code authority activity required, then they call in the RCMP.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Carrying on with this training theme, I would like to ask the hon. minister why there seems to be no mention in this budget of any money associated with the proposed police college in southern Alberta. As far as I am able to tell, there has been no allocation of funds to continue with the announcement from last year with respect to the police college. Why is there no money in the budget for the construction of the college, and is the minister still committed to having a police college, or is this program being scrapped? Has he changed his mind, or did the government, in fact, change its position with respect to this?

Then maybe a general question that would follow from there is: can the minister tell us if there are, in fact, other files or other projects under his purview which have been shelved or postponed or frozen since he took over as Minister of Public Security and Solicitor General?

Basically, if they were priorities before and they are no longer, which ones, if in fact there are? The police college question: why doesn't this budget contain any money with respect to construction or progress on this said project?

8:10

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, in regard to the police college the reason there's no money allocated in our capital budget is because we are planning on proceeding with this initiative on a P3, a public/private partnership. It is going ahead in Fort Macleod, which is the site that we chose last fall. Before we go out for an expression of interest on a P3, we need to identify the projected class sizes, course material, that type of thing, to ensure that we get the appropriately designed facility. So we're hoping within the next month, actually, that we will be going out for an expression of interest on a P3, and we'll proceed from there. We hope that we will start construction next year, so that particular initiative is moving right along.

None of the capital projects in my ministry have been put on hold. As the hon. member knows, we have recently announced that we're proceeding with the Edmonton Remand Centre, which is a project much needed and will proceed at a cost of a little over \$300 million. Again, we are proceeding with the design of that facility, and we

*See right col., para. 3

*See left col., para. 2

hope to start construction on that later on this year. So things are moving right along, and we're quite excited about the projects under our ministry.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to ask the minister: why utilize a public/private partnership, or a P3 model, for the construction of the police college versus a project that's entirely funded by taxpayers? It might be a question for maybe the President of the Treasury Board to answer, but I'm just interested in hearing what this minister thinks. You know, the value of using a P3 versus an entirely public project and if he believes that a P3 is going to provide the taxpayers with cost savings and if, in fact, there has been any comparison of potential costs and, in his opinion, how much we stand to save by utilizing a P3.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Yeah, I'd be glad to offer my thoughts on a private/public partnership. First of all, I want to assure the hon. member that unless this P3 turns out to be in the best interests of Albertans, it will not be proceeding in that manner. I am fully confident, though, that at the end of the day, when we look at the cost of a private/public partnership versus the government up fronting the money over a 25-, 30-year period, this particular project will be an example of how well P3s can work. I just firmly believe that it has all the right ingredients for a successful P3, and as we proceed through the expression of interest and getting in proposals, I guess that will be borne out. But at the end of the day, whichever avenue we pursue, we'll make sure that it will be in the best interests of Albertans. A lot of times, in this particular P3 example, there are examples when it's easier and a lot better to use other people's money to build something and pay it back over a period of time, when your maintenance costs are guaranteed over a period of time, et cetera. So those are all things that we will be taking into account. Again, I'm confident that this project will proceed.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I noticed that the minister was smiling. He probably knows that I'm skeptical, but that's a discussion we should have a different time.

Moving on to the victims of crime, on page 288 of the business plan under goal 6, core business 4, it states: "The ministry ensures that . . . victims of crime receive prompt financial benefits and assists community groups and organizations to establish . . . programs and initiatives that meet the needs of victims of crime." My question is: how will the ministry do this? Will the minister provide funding for things like sexual assault centres? The question is with respect to the victims of crimes fund. After those boards are chosen in the different jurisdictions, they resort to fundraising. Does the minister have any thoughts in terms of offering them assistance so their reliance on fundraising would be minimized or eliminated? You know, certain areas seem to be benefiting from the victims of crime fund allocation compared to others, so I'm interested in hearing the minister's thoughts on this.

I have an example here of an agency like the John Howard Society which stated to members of the opposition that they need more funding for operations. Currently their funding is tied to the delivery of specific programs. Will the minister as part of his strategy look

into providing more funding to organizations and allowing them some room to manoeuvre, some decision-making mechanism so they can actually administer their programs the way they see fit? I'm not asking for complete autonomy; I'm just asking for some wriggle room for them to allocate those funds as they deem appropriate, with full accountability to the minister and to this House on how they spend it.

I'm going to reference the MLA report of the Alberta Victims of Crime Consultation, which was released to guide the government's development of programs and services for victims of crime. Can the minister tell us if there was, in fact, any progress after that report was released and if any of these recommendations were implemented? Can the minister also tell us what specific initiatives have been developed to expand, one, the knowledge of the victims of crime fund and, two, access to that fund?

There is a major problem with the existing program in terms of what seems to be a surplus situation. I honestly think that people who are genuinely classified as victims of crime, people who have been seriously affected by crime, should gain access quickly to the program and to the funds in it and also equitably. How many people were turned away? How many people were told, "No, you don't qualify"? There seems to be an increasing surplus, a surplus that keeps growing every year in terms of this fund. Why is the money in that fund not being used more, if I can phrase my question this way? So there seems to be a sort of stockpiling of funds. What is it being used for, and why aren't more people successful in accessing those programs? Where are these surpluses going? Are they sitting in the fund? Are they leaving the fund? Are they being reabsorbed into the general budget? I need to know. I also want to know how many people are employed to adjudicate or to handle requests for compensation under that program.

To recap: why does there seem to be a surplus? Where is it going? How many people administer this program? Why can't organizations be given the flexibility to make those allocation decisions with more room and more responsibility on their part, again with full accountability to the minister. We're not asking for this to be taken away. You know, they're the ones on the ground. They're the ones with their ear to the ground, basically, and we should allow them to do this job if they choose to take it on. Again, helping them so they don't have to resort to fundraising in the different jurisdictions. Those boards, you know, once they're established, that's basically something that they do, and I think definitely there is a role for government to accept more of this responsibility as compared to those individuals.

Thank you.

8:20

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, in regard to the progress of the recommendations in the MLA report I want the hon. member to know that half of these recommendations have been completed, and the remaining ones are in various stages of completion.

In regard to funds for organizations that can apply to victims of crime, there is \$4.4 million in '06-07 that was put into that program. These services provided to victims by these organizations would include such things as information with the criminal justice process in the victim's case as it progresses through the system, information about the victim impact statement program, the financial benefits program, the requesting restitution program, preparation for court, and the accompaniment to hearings. Other specialized services to distinct types of victims are provided by approved community-based programs.

As the hon. member is aware, we recently released a victims of crime protocol, the first ever in Canada. It was introduced last month. This particular document was also translated into 11 different languages to help new Albertans through our system, to give them full knowledge of what they can expect as they work their way through our justice system.

In regard to actual victims of crime payments this is all covered under the Victims of Crime Act. In '06-07 that fund was at \$10.5 million as one-time payouts to eligible victims. Because we increased the awareness in regard to victims of crime consultation, we are seeing an increase in the number of victims coming forward, and the budget this year has increased by \$1.9 million, Mr. Chairman.

In regard to staffing levels there are 10 staff who look after the victims of crime funds.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Moving on, I would like to briefly talk about asset building. First, I'd like to mention the fact that the Alberta Liberal caucus has received a presentation from Chief Mike Boyd, who really thinks very strongly about this asset building component as a way to reduce crime and to catch stuff, as he refers to it, upstream rather than downstream, when the actual criminal act has been committed.

We discussed in the earlier estimate of the Ministry of Justice the Crime Reduction and Safe Communities Task Force, and I questioned the hon. Minister of Justice as to what value he thinks we're going to get from this particular task force. One thing the task force heard was that we should be doing more than just adding police officers and that we should be proactive and collaborative between the different police agencies and services, between the different communities, between the different levels of government, and so on, and so forth. It's good to hear these ideas, but really the communities today need more than listening forums. They need more than words. They need provincial leadership to address the root causes of crime.

Again, in the Ministry of Justice's deliberations earlier tonight we talked about education, and we talked about poverty, and we talked about all these root causes of crime and what we can do to catch things before they happen. The province has the financial capabilities, and according to goal 2 of the business plan they also have the desire to do this. However, the only action we have seen so far is the task force.

In Richmond, B.C., the RCMP have forged a relationship with communities based upon the model known as asset building, which I mentioned earlier. Quite simply, it basically means that the police and the community can work together to show young people that they care about them, that they care about their future. They help achieve this by building sustained relationships with youth and youth leaders, rebuilding connections and commitments in neighbourhoods, getting involved in youth service programs, influencing organizations and networks, sharing a vision of safe and healthy communities, and involving the young people in that vision to get them to be players, to be active participants rather than people who just watch things happen or watch things develop. The theory is that the more assets a young person has in their lives, the more likely they will make positive choices. That's one example.

Another study or another example titled A Portrait of Sustainable Crime Prevention in Selected Canadian Communities was conducted by Carleton University for the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Working Group of Community Safety and Crime Prevention in 2004. This particular exercise looked at different community

profiles and developed strategies to form community partnerships to reduce crimes at the grassroots level. I would argue that reducing crime at the grassroots level is by far the most successful model, and it's probably the model we should be pursuing most aggressively.

Can the minister tell us if he has instructed his department to look at asset building as a provincial model to reduce crime in order to achieve goal 2 of his ministry's business plan? In other words, it's commendable that municipal police forces are looking at this on a municipality-by-municipality basis, and them taking the initiative is laudable. But more centrally and more province-wide is this also a direction that this minister is headed? Has he in fact instructed his staff to adopt this model, and what steps has he taken to do that? If not, then frankly the question would be: why not? If not now, then why not now, and why not immediately?

Mr. Chairman, I'll just cede the floor to the minister again because I think this is an important issue. Then I'll have a couple more questions, and I know that some of my colleagues also have a couple more.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you. Yes, in regard to asset building, Mr. Chairman, my ministry firmly believes that the whole community needs to be involved in crime prevention. In regard to consulting with our community, I believe it's important that we get out into our community to find out, first of all, what concerns they have and also to get their input on solutions to ensure that we utilize best practices as we move forward.

I also agree that it's important to have programs in place to ensure that our children stay on a straight and narrow path and avoid getting involved in criminal activities. I want to just mention the success we've had with the Hobbema cadet program, where I believe that over 400 of that community's youth are now involved in a program that keeps these children busy, teaches them some discipline, and keeps them away from gang activities.

I also want to let the hon. member know that, yes, my entire staff are committed to looking at the whole spectrum of crime prevention. It's not just a matter of putting more policemen on the street and building more prisons. Obviously, anything we can do – in fact, our whole government is committed to a number of cross-ministry initiatives which put programs in place to ensure that we get to the youth, especially, in our society to keep them active and involved in activities that keep them away from criminal activities. Also, in our correctional facilities we have a number of programs, obviously, there to ensure that those who do get involved in criminal activities have programs in place to ensure that when they get back out into our communities, they have the skills necessary to get on with their lives.

The hon. member should know that this department has developed a five-year vision that encompasses all aspects of a law enforcement network, from developing a single-site training centre to recruiting and retention to creating more dynamic and flexible information technology systems. This will help guide us as we continue to evolve our business to meet the ever-changing face of crime in the 21st century. At a recent round-table on policing held in Red Deer, we had law enforcement leaders. Those responsible for police oversight and academics agree that working together more effectively with available resources will strengthen how we respond to and how we prevent crimes. Our department will hold a similar round-table next month to look at options to address recruitment and retention issues currently facing all members of the law enforcement community.

8:30

Other asset-building priorities include the development of a correction services blueprint to ensure that our department is properly positioned to face short-, mid-, and long-term challenges related to infrastructure, staffing, and delivery of evidence-based correctional programs.

Replacement of the Edmonton Remand Centre with a state-of-the-art facility will improve staff and inmate safety, reduce transportation costs associated with moving inmates to other facilities, and also will reduce overcrowding.

I mentioned earlier our \$100 million information technology strategy to address the information needs of our department, the law enforcement community, and the criminal justice system.

We're also committed to work on a network radio communication system to ensure that first responders can communicate with each other during times of crisis and allow law enforcement agencies to continue to work together to tackle organized and serious crime.

We're also committed to the development of the Alberta police and peace officer training centre, our new training centre, which I already spoke to, which will deliver standardized training, which will ensure that all of our police and peace officers in the province have a similar and a standardized level of training.

Cross-ministry initiatives include the crime reduction strategy, which the hon. Attorney General and Minister of Justice spoke to. We will co-ordinate the work of 14 government ministries and the recommendations from the safe communities task force to help reduce crime in our communities.

Work continues with Alberta Justice to complete our comprehensive court security plan. This includes perimeter security at courthouses and the final stage of our video conferencing initiative.

Mr. Chairman, our government and my ministry in particular have a whole number of issues regarding asset building to ensure that we meet our goal of reducing crime in the province of Alberta.

The Chair: The hon. member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Now, to switch gears to some extent, I would like to talk about this minister wearing the other hat, which is being the Minister of Public Security. You know, in other jurisdictions they call him the minister of interior, sometimes also referred to as the minister of emergency preparedness. I'm talking about security threats. We've heard that Canada has been identified as a potential target for terrorism, for example. Under goal 5 of the business plan for this ministry strategy 5.5 states that the ministry will "assist industry in their crisis management planning to ensure industry is prepared in the event of crisis." Canada, like I mentioned, has been on that target list for international terrorism. The RCMP has confirmed this through their own threat assessment protocols.

Can the minister tell us what involvement his ministry is having with industry currently to ensure that Alberta industry is protected from a possible terrorist attack? I'm talking about existing industry, Mr. Chairman, and then also potential industry because we've all heard musings or rumours about this government's recent change of opinion, and now they're appearing to be more receptive to having nuclear energy brought in for operations like the oil sands, for example. That has its own heightened level of risk associated with it just by the nature of that operation. Has the minister started talking to industry, both existing and industry that is contemplating moving into the province, to assist them in terms of their crisis management planning?

The other thing I would like to reference is that it's not only

industry that the minister should be talking to. I recently read an article that was published in the publication *FrontLine Security* in their spring 2007 issue. This particular article was written by Dr. Joe Varner. It identifies more than just industry; it basically talks about critical infrastructure. Critical infrastructure has a definition in the U.S., and it also has a definition in Canada. The Canadian definition is broader. It's more thorough and more complete. Basically, as per this article, it says that public safety and emergency preparedness Canada defined critical infrastructure as

those physical and information technology facilities, networks, services and assets which, if disrupted or destroyed, would have a serious impact on the health, safety, security or economic well-being of Canadians or the effective functioning of governments in Canada.

It identifies 10 sectors, so when I say that we shouldn't just be talking to industry, here are a few other examples. The 10 sectors are energy and utilities; communications and information technology; finance; health care; food; water; transportation; safety in terms of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear safety and hazardous materials, search and rescue, emergency services, and dams; government, in terms of services, facilities, information networks, assets, and sites and monuments; and manufacturing. That's the last one, manufacturing, and so on. So we're talking more than just industry.

I just want to know if the minister has really started developing this plan. Many times in this House the government has been criticized for its lack of a plan. I think one of the areas where we should really start developing this plan is right here in this minister's department because this is a plan we can't afford to not have. Is there a plan? I know the minister mentioned his five-year vision. Is this part of that five-year vision for his ministry? What negotiations, if any, has he started, and where is he going from here?

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to assure the hon. member that, yes, we have a plan. In fact, our security plan is held up as an example for the rest of Canada. Our plan is a partnership between our province, our police, our industry, and the federal government. Our plan identifies terrorist threats as early as possible. We warn communities and industry of any threats, take immediate action to prevent or mitigate the terrorist act, and our plan will ensure the continued delivery of essential services. There is a protocol that ensures that I am informed of serious threats that may require an elevation of our province-wide threat level, and we are always examining and re-examining our counterterrorism and crisis management plan to ensure that it remains the best in our country.

In regard to nuclear reactors, the oil sands, or pipelines we definitely have a counterterrorist plan in place to protect all critical infrastructure in our province. As I mentioned before, we use the best intelligence that's available not only across our country but internationally. If a terrorist act were ever to occur, our plan gives all partners, including law enforcement agencies, the ability to respond immediately.

As I mentioned earlier, our plan is hailed as one of the best in the country, and I can assure the hon. member that currently there is no identified threat to our province.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to switch gears one more time and talk about the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, which has recently been moved and now falls under the Solicitor General's responsibility.

This might be looked at as a rhetorical question, or it might not be the place for it in the budget debate, but I would like to know if the minister is at all concerned that there seems to be a trend developing with respect to liquor retail in this province. We had at one point in the past a provincial monopoly, and then we were told that this was not the way to keep doing things and that it was bad for the consumer. We allowed privatization to come in, and now, with all the mergers and takeovers that are happening in the retail liquor network, we are basically seeing the creation of private business monopolies. I would like to hear the minister's opinion on this particular matter.

Also, in terms of the distribution network, if, in fact, the problems from last summer and, basically, the problems we witnessed in 2006 and early on in 2007 have been remedied, if he is satisfied with the liquor distribution network. Again, that's a monopoly, and there were suggestions that maybe we should have one distributor for northern Alberta and one for southern, if not three even. Where does the minister stand on this particular issue, and is he satisfied that all the wrinkles of the past have been ironed out and that the system is functioning again the way it was intended? So the monopolies question and then the liquor distribution question.

8:40

Under the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission my third question would be with respect to gaming. I have to emphasize that where I'm coming from, Mr. Chairman, is that gambling does not create wealth. Gambling only redistributes wealth, and it does that basically on the basis of a social ill. It's a problem, and the moral or ethical question of whether government should be generating revenue from gambling is maybe a discussion for a different day, but we know that a large percentage of the revenues generated by gambling in this province comes from problem gamblers. A question to the minister: in his opinion, what should we do to minimize problem gambling? And maybe, you know, a question with respect to programs to help people who want to quit their addiction to gambling, and the other question with respect to the lottery terminals in the province.

We've had discussions, you know, on and off about the integrity and security of those networks, if in fact lottery owners/operators are winning a disproportionate number of prizes. I know that the minister is currently reviewing some audit findings and recommendations and that there seems to be also an internal investigation going on now. Again, if he can share with us an update with respect to this particular issue. You know, if people absolutely have to gamble, then at least we can even out the playing field for them. Most lose their money, but some would win. That's how I look at it. The Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission now is under his authority, and I am interested to hear his thoughts on those two issues.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, in regard to liquor retail sales in the province of Alberta the hon. member spoke about the deregulation of the industry back in the 1990s, a time when we had, I believe, 200 government-owned liquor stores, approximately 3,500 different types of products on our shelves. Well, today we have over a thousand retail stores and over 16,000 different products on the shelves. In regard to customer service that has been very successful.

However, the hon. member talked about the concern around takeovers and if it follows a trend of big business, where we end up

again with only one particular company or two companies running the whole industry. We're nowhere near that in Alberta. In fact, the takeover that has been discussed recently in the news, if that were to proceed, would give one owner I believe 20 per cent of the market. The way our industry is structured with a lot of smaller ma-and-pa type stores, at this point in time, I don't have a concern with these takeovers upsetting the market. I think it's important that the Gaming and Liquor Commission ensure, as they have to this point, that it's a level playing field for all people who are involved in that industry. At this point in time, I'm quite comfortable that this particular buyout, if it takes place, will not create a problem for the smaller businesses, that they will continue to operate in an effective manner.

In regard to the distribution problems we had last year, yes, when the deregulation of the industry took place, there was a monopoly that was set up in regard to the warehousing. It actually worked quite well for I believe 15 or 16 years before we ran into a problem last year. The problem, of course, was due to an increase of sales in the province, which is a sign of our booming economy. Then when we did start having a few shortage problems, a lot of the retailers themselves escalated that problem by trying to stock up with more than what they would normally carry in the warehouse. It did create a bit of a problem, but at the end of the day liquor sales in the province were up approximately 15 per cent from the year before.

It was a bit of a glitch in the system. We've hired an independent consultant, who reviewed the concern. We have put in short-term measures and are quite confident that this year we're going to be getting through the busy season without the types of problems we had in the past. We have proposed some changes to the agreement with the warehouse to ensure that things move onwards and upwards, so I believe that in the short term and the mid term we're in pretty good shape, but we are, of course, reviewing long-term solutions to make sure that our public continues to be served in a very professional and forthright manner.

In regard to gambling the social responsibility side of gambling is certainly a big responsibility and one that we take very seriously. The hon. member talked about the per cent of Albertans who gambling is a problem for. Our numbers indicate that it's less than 10 per cent of the people who have a problem with gambling, and less than 5 per cent would be considered serious. That being said, we want to make sure that those people who need help get the help that they require, and we have programs in place to ensure that that's happened.

We're always looking at improving as well. We are setting up information kiosks in a lot of our casinos, information that would help somebody if they did think they had a problem. We're also looking at putting hosts in our casinos so that they can go through the gaming areas on a regular basis and monitor the activities there. If they see somebody who they think may be a problem gambler, then they can discuss that with them and, again, offer them the help that they need.

So there are a number of initiatives that we're moving forward with, but we're always cognizant of the fact that there are some people, whether it's through liquor sales or through gambling, who run into problems. It's important for us, and we take the responsibility very seriously. We're going to make sure that we have safety nets to make sure that those folks get the help they need.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. My questions have to do with the co-ordination of enforcement services. For example, we've got

a variety of enforcement agencies. We have special constables, we have sheriffs, we have court security officers, we have conservation officers, city police, and RCMP, and I've probably left out three or four different organizations. I'm just wondering how the government co-ordinates the services and how it establishes the priorities in terms of who outranks who, whose jurisdictional authority sort of covers or is in charge in certain circumstances.

I want to go very specifically to Crown lands, parks, and protected areas, where the chief responsibility for maintaining and enforcing laws has to do with the conservation officers. I would like to note that since the early 1990s almost half of the original conservation officers were laid off as part of the government's cutbacks in order to pay down the debt. Now conservation officers have such a wide expectation in terms of kilometres of radius that they're expected to cover. When it comes to long weekends, it's impossible for the conservation officers themselves to carry out their duties. I know that, for example, sustainable resources has co-ordinated to a degree, say, in the Ghost-Waiparous area, which was a fairly lawless area, particularly on long weekends, by having more off-duty RCMP put in overtime, and that's appreciated.

My personal experience from 2002 through 2004, when I ran the campground at Cataract Creek, was that the nearest RCMP base was over 60 kilometres away, in Turner Valley. The only time I ever saw the RCMP out was when one of the campers got lost. The RCMP came by the following morning, rather perturbed at having to follow up on the poor choices this camper made with his children to go hiking late at night. It caused an awful lot of consternation for the police services. Fortunately, everything worked out well, but in three years I saw the RCMP out there once.

8:50

In 2002 thanks to the G-8 we had a greater predominance. We had the army, obviously, providing extra security for members of the G-8, and we had a number of seasonal conservation officers added to the policing. But when it came to 2003-2004, I felt very much on my own as a campground attendant, and some very strange circumstances occurred.

For example – and I'll go back to 2002 – a military-style assault shotgun with a complete clip on the outside was protruding out of the pack of one of my campers, who was sporting a bowie knife, and I indicated to the individual that you can't have an unsealed firearm in a campground. The conservation officer responded about an hour and a half after I called in this particular article, but basically the only thing between me and the potential offender – another example: a fellow who was demonstrating to his kids that he could protect them from the roaming black bears and grizzlies set off a bear banger in the campsite, and again I was left to deal with this individual, who had frightened all the campers and all their children in order to demonstrate his capability to protect his own. I couldn't deal with that. I dealt with it on my end.

My concern is the lack of policing in general, the potential of communication between the various organizations. For example, RCMP are equipped with satellite phones; conservation officers aren't. As camp personnel, front-line individuals who frequently came across an accident first or a security breach in the wilderness, we only had our two-way radio, which was not a very effective service.

My last comment has to do with sheriffs' training. I do not believe that a six-week course qualifies a person to have the responsibility of operating a provincial vehicle, pulling over speeders, and, you know, enforcing a whole series of laws, including the potential of having a shotgun in the vehicle.

The last concern I have is: what kind of fluidity, if any, is there

between the various types of enforcement officers? Right now, I believe, the RCMP are taking on an awful lot of extra responsibility looking after and supervising the sheriffs. Rather than having the extra support from the sheriffs, it's taking them an undue amount of time to supervise them. I believe sheriffs should receive training similar to that of conservation officers, which is at least two years of training at, for example, the University of Lethbridge.

It's somewhat rambling, but what co-ordination of enforcement services is there? Will we require in the future sheriffs to have greater training before they're turned loose on our highways and court systems, et cetera?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, in regard to the opening comments, I guess, regarding the different agencies at different levels of policing authority in the province. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity spoke about our sheriffs, the police, the peace officers, the city police, the conservation officers, the folks that patrol our provincial parks. First of all, I want to say that it's important that these different agencies all work together to the best of their ability. They do that. You know, we certainly can always look at improving it. In regard to their authority, the authority of whatever agencies you've looked at is covered under legislation, so it's quite clear to each of these agencies as to what their roles and responsibilities are. I want to say that even during the May long weekend our sheriffs, the RCMP, and the conservation officers all did work together in regard to patrolling our Crown land and also privately owned land to keep in check some of those who tend to abuse those lands.

I want to also point out to the hon. member that it's the responsibility of the whole community to ensure that our lands are protected and looked after in a proper manner. Citizens need to be more and more vigilant to keep on top of these activities. The hon. member knows that Alberta is a big province. I don't think we could ever have the resources to patrol all of the Crown land and all of the lands that are being utilized by a lot of these off-highway vehicles that we see around today. Yes, it would always be nice to have more officers on the street, but, again, it's more than just having more people driving around in pickup trucks, et cetera, enforcing the law. It's also educating the public to let them know what's expected of them when they are on the land. Using these lands is not a right; it's a privilege. We have to improve our vigilance in making sure that we get that message out.

The hon. member spoke about the communications between the different agencies. The IT program that we're putting together now will ensure that we have a common database for all of our policing agencies across the province so that they can share data in a lot more proactive manner than they are today. We're also working on a first responder radio system, which, again, will tie in all these agencies to ensure that they can communicate back and forth. Those two initiatives are certainly going to improve the effectiveness and the efficiency of the agency as well as their safety and the safety of the public, so we are moving forward on those initiatives.

The hon. member spoke about the hours of training for our sheriffs and concern around their ability to patrol our highways. I want to let the hon. member know that these sheriffs are trained to a higher level than conservation officers are. They're all graduates of programs. They've taken an additional minimum of 400 hours of training. They do not carry shotguns in their vehicles. They are trained and carry side arms. They are all on our highways to enforce the highway traffic act and the liquor control act. They are not authorized to enforce the Criminal Code of this country. When they

run into areas like that, where they need the assistance of the RCMP, they call on the officers for that.

Now, initially, when the sheriffs first came out, there were comments around that they were going to create extra work for the RCMP, that they would have to come out and rescue them. Well, that hasn't been the case at all. In fact, all the RCMP officers I talked to are quite thankful that we have the sheriffs out on our streets because they work very well with the RCMP in carrying out their mandates. They're doing just a great job, and actually, by being out there, they allow the RCMP to do a lot more work in patrolling the backcountry that you're talking about to ensure that those people that are using those lands follow the laws that apply in those particular areas.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East. You have about 30 seconds.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. I just wanted to make one very quick comment about the provincial integrated child exploitation, the ICE team. I just wanted to say that if anyone in this House has ever looked into the eyes of a four-year-old girl who has been traumatized by a sexual predator, they would make sure that there was extra money being put into the funding for these teams that will protect our children.

9:00

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt, but the time for this order of business is past. The minister may want to respond in writing.

We are now moving on to the Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology, and I will invite the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology to present his opening remarks.

Advanced Education and Technology

Mr. Horner: Well, good evening, Mr. Chairman, and thank you. It's an honour to present to the Assembly the Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology's business plan for '07-10 and budget estimates for '07-08. Before I begin my presentation, I would like to introduce the officials within my department who played key roles in developing this plan and who are with me here on the floor of the House, the first being Bob Fessenden, my deputy minister; Phil Gougeon, the assistant deputy minister of adult learning; Shirley Dul, assistant deputy minister of apprenticeship and industry training; Gerry Waisman, executive director of postsecondary institution services; and Blake Bartlett, the executive director of finance and administration.

Before we get into the questions, Mr. Chairman, I do have some opening remarks that I'd like to make. Our business plan reflects how the ministry is moving to strengthen Alberta's advanced learning and innovation systems while helping to build a more diverse economy. This plan also focuses on ensuring that Albertans have access to develop the learning, work, and life skills they need while tapping into the long-held Alberta spirit of entrepreneurship and lifelong learning.

It was December when the Premier gave Advanced Education and Technology a clear mandate: increase access, affordability, and quality in postsecondary education as the number one; number two is to increase support for community education and literacy programs; three, develop a strategy for technology commercialization and value-added economic diversification. Our mandate and the three-year business plan guide the ministry's future initiatives and ensure continued collaboration with institution and industry partners as we work together to build a stronger Alberta. The business plan

details a number of key projects, priorities, and initiatives for Advanced Education and Technology. We want to ensure that Albertans have the opportunity to access postsecondary programs and flourish while within the system and following graduation.

One of the key priorities is to better define the roles and responsibilities of postsecondary institutions in Alberta. Work is already under way on encouraging institutions to work more collaboratively. From the youth in Lethbridge who is taking academic upgrading online to the adult student in Fort McMurray who plans to enter medical school, Alberta Advanced Education and Technology has significant opportunities to make the system serve people better. A key initiative where work is continuing is the concept and principles around Campus Alberta, which can be realized by emphasizing transferability, seamless learning, and curriculum sharing.

Another important initiative we've undertaken is to build on the momentum of the affordability framework, which was released last November, and to ensure that financial need is not a barrier to any Alberta learner. With Budget 2007 we've made critical investments that will provide direct financial assistance for students before they begin classes this fall. The ministry is providing increases to student loan limits and living allowances, eliminating vehicle restrictions, and reducing parental contributions. Students facing rent increases will be helped by these changes as well as through the regular programming that we have through Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry. The commitment to student finance is focused on enabling more students to qualify and access our world-class system while also opening the doors to more scholarships, bursaries, and grants and expanding tax credits to full- and part-time students. Our approach to creating an affordable postsecondary system is a holistic one.

My ministry is also providing institutions with funding that helps address and offset impacts of the affordability framework and the limits on tuition fee increases. Our business plan also addresses the capital and infrastructure needs of institutions by increasing our funding for the expansion, upgrading, and maintenance of Alberta's postsecondary facilities.

It's also important to note that a postsecondary education is not just limited to universities and colleges. My ministry is working to make a difference for Alberta's apprenticeship and industry training system. The business plan will see Advanced Education and Technology adding new apprenticeship technical training seats and funding learning resources, supplies, and services to support these additional training seats. This increase in funding answers the calls from industries in regions across our province. Registration for 2007-08 apprenticeship technical training classes at more than 10 technical training institutes in the province began May 14 of this year. For up-to-date information on the availability of technical training seats across the province you can visit the Alberta Advanced Education and Technology department's trade website.

Our commitment to apprenticeship doesn't end with our investment in spaces. We will also work with Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry to implement the building and educating tomorrow's workforce strategy.

Advanced Education and Technology is also expanding the amount of learning opportunities available in our communities, enhancing partnerships and ensuring that Albertans have the skills they need to contribute to our society, to our economy, and to the high quality of life we enjoy today. The goals for advanced learning in Alberta through this business plan are ambitious, important, and focus on the future, a future that is helping to build a stronger province for generations to come.

In terms of technology the '07-08 business plan continues to move forward with strategic funding for research, innovation, and

technology commercialization initiatives. The three-year plan covers our traditional sectors, including energy, agriculture, and forestry as well as new emerging areas like life sciences, nanotechnology, and information and communications technology.

With energy being the engine of our economy, it is important for the ministry's investments to advance energy research and innovation in bitumen upgrading, clean coal and carbon technology, enhanced recovery techniques, renewable energy, and CO₂ capture and storage. Enhancing Alberta's value-added capabilities is an essential element in realizing Alberta's energy future. Taking our natural resources further up the value chain offers hope for new industries and opportunities for Albertans. Our commitment to the efficient recovery and getting more value from Alberta's energy resources calls for and is met by an increase in funding to the Alberta Energy Research Institute.

[Mr. Johnson in the chair]

In November 2006 the government of Alberta committed \$30 million in funding towards implementation of a water research strategy developed through the efforts of the Alberta Science and Research Authority and other Alberta-based partners. The water research strategy implementation is being managed through an agreement with Alberta ingenuity, and the life sciences branch budget for 2007-08 contains an increase to support this investment.

We will also continue to support the implementation of the Alberta nanotechnology strategy. In every phase of technology and innovation a strong environmental platform has been created where highly qualified people can conduct their research and pilot their projects right here. To see these discoveries and technological advances come to fruition will require government's guiding hand to take them from concept to reality.

Implementing the goals for technology commercialization has been enhanced by the creation of the Value-added and Technology Commercialization Task Force created earlier this year. This summer the task force will bring forth a report to the ministry which will identify actions to increase the commercialization of market-driven, made-in-Alberta, value-added products and services. Ultimately, with feedback from other sectors of the industry we will create the right policy environment to spur individuals and companies to continue to build on Alberta's excellence in research infrastructure, world-class community of scientists, and renowned advanced learning and turn the dreams of technology commercialization into reality. The objective is to ensure that our economic and social well-being can be enhanced through science, technology, and innovation.

It's especially gratifying to see how far we really have come. The commitments to quality and access in advanced learning combined with our foray into frontiers like life sciences and nanotechnology will help to ensure a very bright future for Alberta's technology and innovation market.

Managing our growth is the theme of Budget 2007, and in a province that is realizing unprecedented growth, the postsecondary system and the technology capabilities must also anticipate and plan for the future. The total government of Alberta investment in Advanced Education and Technology for 2007-08 is \$3.1 billion. This year's spending represents a 22 per cent increase over last year. The '07-08 budget includes a 6 per cent increase in base operating grants to institutions, bringing total operating grant funding to \$1.5 billion. Further increases of 6 per cent per year will be provided in the next two years.

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

Postsecondary institutions will also see a funding increase of \$347 million for capital projects this year. A total of \$1.6 billion will be invested in capital projects over the next three years, including \$300 million in unallocated capital. This funding boost represents a 41 per cent increase in the '06-09 capital plan. This funding will help complete a number of projects, including the Robbins health learning centre at Grant MacEwan College in Edmonton, the expansion of the Lakeland College campus in Lloydminster, the construction of the community learning campus at Olds College, and the University of Calgary's health research innovation centre.

Funding from Advanced Education and Technology in '07-08 will go towards the construction of facilities for the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Calgary, replace the Donald Cameron Hall at Banff Centre, and the Centennial Centre for Interdisciplinary Science on the campus of the University of Alberta. Decisions on the balance of the \$300 million in unallocated capital will be made in accordance with the government of Alberta's capital planning process after and during the roles and responsibilities process being finalized.

We're also ensuring that our postsecondary system is affordable and accessible to Albertans. The ministry is also providing an additional \$4 million for student spaces in '07-08 while increasing overall funding support to postsecondary learners by 31 per cent for student assistance. [Mr. Horner's speaking time expired]

I'll continue at another time.

9:10

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark has indicated a desire to utilize the 20-minute time frame shared back and forth. Is that agreeable to the minister?

Mr. Horner: Sure.

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

Mr. Tougas: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to introduce my support staff, too, but as you can see, when you're in opposition, you learn to work lean and work a little smarter, I hope.

Mr. Chairman, I hope that we'll have a good 60 minutes of debate here. As you said, I'd like to do the little give-and-take thing so we can get as many questions and answers in as possible over the next hour.

You know, one of the good things about being the – sorry, what's the term now? – shadow minister for advanced education is that you get to travel around the province quite a lot and meet some very good people. I have to say that in my travels across the province the people that I've met in the positions of authority in the postsecondary institutions are really quality people. I'm very impressed by the calibre of the presidents, the executives, the students. I see that we have some representatives from the U of A listening attentively up above there. There are some excellent people working in the postsecondary world in Alberta, and I've been very impressed by them.

I hope that I can ask some questions that they have presented to me over the last several months as I've travelled around the province. As the minister said, we have a 22 per cent increase this year, which is good. But, of course, there is a lot of ground to be made up over the last several years, the years when postsecondary was not quite as high a priority with the government as it should be. We in the Official Opposition are very pleased to see more money going into advanced education since this is something we've been asking for for quite some time.

I have a number of topics that I'd like to touch upon here. I'd like

to start first with the access to the future fund or maybe the mysteries of the access to the future fund. As you know, it was the centrepiece Bill 1 two years ago, and at the time I believe it was said to be going to grow to be a \$3 billion fund. We're very supportive of this fund, and everyone that I've spoken to across the institutions in Alberta have all agreed that this is an excellent idea. Originally an Alberta Liberal idea, but that's the end of my political statements here. I just had to throw that one in. You know, I have to get one in anyway. That's the only one. That'll be it. No more after this. Well, maybe a few more.

It appears that the last time any money was put into the fund was in August of 2006, when I believe \$250 million was added. It doesn't seem, unless there's a massive infusion of money planned very quickly, that this will get up to the \$3 billion which was supposed to happen within three years if my memory serves me correctly. So I have a number of questions regarding the access to the future fund, and then we'll go on to some other topics if that's okay.

Now, I don't see anything in the budget adding to the access to the future fund here. Page 180 of the estimates, the Finance section, internal government transfers, shows that there is no planned transfer to the access to the future endowment. My first question is clearly: where is the money for the endowment, and what is the situation with it at this time? Are we going to see it reach a \$3 billion cap within the next two years, three years, five years? Do you have a long-range plan for what we can see for the access to the future fund?

I've also heard from a number of institutions that they were a little unclear about how the fund is being administered. Some stakeholders have expressed this concern with me. There's clear agreement, as I said, that the fund is very worth while and very welcome, but I sensed that there was frustration in the way it is being administered because they're not quite sure exactly what the rules are. Many donors also want to know what is going on. Prospective gifts hang in the balance, from what I've been told.

Now, the minister may recall that a while back in question period I mentioned that one senior administrator at an institution called the bureaucracy around the fund ridiculous. I won't tell you who said that; it doesn't matter. But it's an interesting point that he would come out and say that he thought there was something seriously wrong with it.

What I'd like to hear from the minister is an update on the access to the future fund. What is the situation? Why are there no funds being put into the access to the future fund at this moment? I'd like to hear a little bit more about what has been paid out and how we can get information about it. It seems that there's very little information available about the money that is actually being awarded from it. Generally there would be something on a website or press releases. If there's anything being awarded from the fund, it's very hard to figure out exactly what it is, so perhaps the minister can enlighten us a little bit about how much money has been distributed from the fund and if we're going to get a little bit more information in the future about it.

Also, I've been asked to inquire why donations of equipment have not been included in the matching formula. This is also another area where there's been millions of dollars of equipment offered to postsecondary institutions, particularly SAIT and NAIT, but it doesn't fall under the agreement so that they can actually get matching funds for it.

If the minister could expand a little bit on the status of the access to the future fund right now, I would appreciate it, and then we'll just go on to some other topics.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I, too, agree that in our system we have exceptional staff. We have exceptional managers and CEOs of those institutions. We also have exceptional board members that are working with these CEOs and these institutions to help guide and direct Campus Alberta. We have high-quality researchers, very high-quality researchers. International countries are looking at us and saying: wow, you're becoming very globally recognized. We have high-quality students and motivated students that are interested not only in what their personal studies are but also in what's going on around them.

You know, as far as the access to the future fund and being very supportive of the fund as a good idea, I, too, think it's a great idea. You know, great ideas have many friends and cousins; bad ideas are always orphans. So it's interesting that who came up with it first is probably debatable.

In terms of the access to the future fund it has its own statements because it is a fund outside of government. It's an endowment fund, so they do establish their own statements. But what I can certainly tell the hon. member is that the access to the future fund is managed by the advisory council, who take their role very, very seriously, are very, very keen on the fund and the vision behind that fund, and are very keen on working on the original vision of the access to the future fund and the innovation fund to be coming out of that.

In 2007-2008 funding for the access to the future fund rises to about \$53 million. The fund was created to enhance access to high-quality, affordable advanced learning opportunities by matching donations as well as supporting innovative and collaborative projects. I think we're going to see that become very, very important when you talk about student access, student transferability, being able to access the system at one point and creating a pathway for your career learning. It is, after all, all about the students and filling that need, the societal need that the students are trying to fill. Each of the institutions gets an amount out of that \$53 million based on the criteria set up by the council. The council has a clear set of rules and mandates that are communicated to the institutions.

Yes, the hon. member is correct that when the fund was announced, there was, I guess, an outpouring of generosity from Albertans, you know: here's a great idea, and it all came at once. That was never the intention of the fund. The fund was set up to establish an ongoing amount every year that the institutions could then use to match with public generosity, which they will continue to do. As a period of time elapses, you're going to catch up on some of those. I think the generosity of Albertans isn't based on whether or not they get matched now or get matched over the future but that they get matched. Certainly, there are a lot of very good things that are happening with that access to the future fund.

The government, I think, made it very clear in their budget, when they announced the budget in early April, that should there be surplus funds to what was budgeted, the budget part of that is that one-third is going to go into savings. The first one-third of that is going to go into savings, as the Minister of Finance had mentioned. The priorities are set by the government as to the savings allocations, but the hon. member knows that there is only one other endowment that isn't in my ministry, and that's the Alberta heritage savings trust fund.

I look forward to working on those priorities in the future. I agree with them. All of the institutions believe this is a good idea. All of the industry folks that we've talked to believe this is a good idea, and where we can leverage dollars, we will endeavour to do so.

9:20

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Tougas: Yes. I'd just like to clarify a few comments here. The access to the future fund: I just want to clarify that there is no additional funding going into the fund this year. I'd just like to clarify that. You did mention that \$53 million, I believe, is being allocated from the fund – is that correct? – in '07-08, as I understand it. But I would like to know: is there any additional money going into the fund right now? Does it still sit at a billion or whatever the fund is right now, or will there be some more money going into it?

You also mentioned there are a number of very good things that are happening with the access to the future fund. Again, I'd like to go back to that it would be nice to know what they are. I still haven't found an easily accessible way to see where the money is going and who it's going to.

If the minister could maybe just expand upon those two issues a little bit, please.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. In September of this year the annual report of the access to the future fund will probably be tabled in the House. I'll make sure that we do table it when we come back to the session in the fall. But, certainly, it probably would be released before that, so the hon. member will have an opportunity to review the annual report of the access to the future fund that the council will put forward.

In the meantime the hon. member is probably well aware that the institutions are the ones that are doing the programming to match the projects on an individual basis. In fact, where institutions were not able to raise matching dollars, those dollars are going to actually roll forward for them, so it actually adds to the ability in some of the more remote areas to add to that opportunity that they have.

At this point in time if there's some other detail that you'd like, I'd be more than happy to get you a copy of the listing that every institution – there's a list of what they received, their allocation if you will. We could get that to the hon. member.

Mr. Tougas: When you say their allocation, do you mean how much they are allowed to get or how much they have received in terms of matching funds? I just want to clarify the wording there.

Mr. Horner: Well, essentially the original intent was always that there would be a certain amount that each institution would be allocated from the funds coming out of the billion dollars that we currently have, the \$3 billion at its maturity – right? – when it's fully funded. Then there is an amount that every institution is going to receive from that to be fair to all institutions across the province. Some institutions have a much easier time at raising dollars than others, and that's part of the issue here. So the \$53 million which I referred to is separated out amongst those institutions, and I'd be more than happy to get the hon. member the list.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Tougas: Yes. Just one last time on the access to the future fund: is there no money being put into the fund this year? Is it just going to sit at that current total? Are there any plans for any further money to go into the access to the future fund?

Mr. Horner: Well, as I mentioned to the hon. member earlier in my response, the budget that was brought in this spring does not have any allocation to the access to the future fund; however, should we be in a position to do so from further surplus, the budget does state that we would be taking one-third to savings. It is my view and what

I will be lobbying hard for is to have an increase to the access to the future fund.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Tougas: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to go on to capital projects and capacity now for a few moments. I see that there was an increase of 88 per cent in capital grants this year, which is an impressive number and certainly necessary. We, of course, have a lot of catching up to do after a number of years when our postsecondary education was somewhat on the back burner.

I have a little bit of an understanding of what the minister must go through trying to figure out where the money should go. In my travels around the province I hear at each institution I've been to: "Look what we've got here. We've got this brilliant thing planned. We've got this monumental project here. We've got this. We've got that." Everybody has wonderful projects, and I suppose that if the minister had found another billion dollars floating around somewhere, everybody would be happy. [interjection] Four billion dollars. Okay. That shouldn't be too hard to find.

It does bring up the whole question of the decision-making process of I believe you call it the capital planning process, and I'd like to go into that for a little bit. For instance, SAIT, as you know, has that capital project, the trades and technology complex I believe it's called, and of course NAIT has the proposed Ralph Klein campus. From what I've heard, they believe that they're not getting any money for it. SAIT is not quite sure what's going on there, either, the last time I spoke to them.

Maybe the minister can go on for some time about how the capital planning process works. I'm sorry, not some time. Briefly. I know you could probably go on for a long time about it. Exactly who does call the shots on this? We've heard that institutions can put forward project options, but the ministry, of course, holds the purse strings, and they make the decisions about what is going to be funded, and what isn't. How collaborative is this process? Is there a certain amount of, "Well, NAIT got money this year; SAIT gets money next year." Is there anything along those lines? Does the President of the Treasury Board, say, have any sort of say in how this money is spent, or is this envelope of money that you would have entirely at your disposal?

I'm wondering if maybe the minister can talk a little bit about why the money is kept under such tight control. I know that you don't want to just throw away money all over the place, but at one institution I talked to, one of the representatives said: "Just turn us loose. We can raise money. We can do this if we just get the okay." There seems to be a certain level of frustration. They're waiting. You know, "We're ready. We've got our plans. We're ready to go." But then there's kind of a road block somewhere, and it's generally with the government, waiting for the money to show up.

Secondly, the press release that came out with the budget listed the following major projects as receiving funding over the coming three years: the University of Alberta centennial centre for interdisciplinary science, the University of Calgary digital library, a health resource innovation facility at the University of Alberta, a health research innovation centre at the University of Calgary. I believe the minister mentioned some other ones too. I didn't have time to write them all down. I'm wondering if there are any others in the future that we have not announced or if he can give us sort of like a pecking order, perhaps, like top of the list, some sort of priority?

Mr. Horner: You want me to announce them now?

Mr. Tougas: Yeah, sure. Why not? We've got nothing else to do here.

There's the whole question, of course, of construction cost overruns. As you know, it's getting hugely expensive to build anything here. Could we get to the point where you're just going to say: it's just too expensive to build this thing, and we're just going to have to shut this one down? As I recall, I think it was the previous Premier who said, "Just don't build it if you can't afford it" or something along those lines when he was talking about cities and how they're going to spend money. Is this going to be something that could be happening at some time in the future?

Maybe I'll let the minister answer a little bit of that question, and then I'll have some more supplementary questions on capital projects and capacity.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, the capital planning process and the prioritization of where we're going is a huge task given the number of institutions that we have in the province and the number of institutions that are currently experiencing growth and expanding. There are capital projects under way at pretty much all of our institutions at this point in time in one way, shape, or another or in planning, or the ground is dug.

In essence, we are moving towards the roles and responsibilities and mandate framework that we are working collaboratively with all of the institutions. I know that the hon. member is aware that we had all institutions into Government House in early February to discuss this idea of roles and responsibilities and mandates within a framework of Campus Alberta. As part of that, what we need to do on an annual basis is determine what the need is in terms of the capital, in terms of the spaces. What is industry telling us that the need is out there on the job market, as an example? What is the need in the health workforce strategy? What is the need in government? What is the need for the postsecondaries to offer the right type of programming, geographically, in remote areas perhaps? What's the appropriate need for the institutions in terms of their maintenance? All of those things have to come together for an overall plan for the province.

All of the institutions, then, need to look at their individual plans. Whether this was done in the past or not: I've only been in the post six months, hon. member, so I'm not going to say whether it was or not. Each of those institutions needs to look at their plans in the context of the Campus Alberta approach and the needs that we have throughout the province.

We need to be able to gather information from the students. What are the students telling us through their applications into the system? Once we have all of that information in hand, and we then take a look at the capital plans that have been prepared by the institutions, we're going to get a lot closer in the discussions with the institutions about how they fit into that and then determine whether the plan that they had is going to fit.

The hon. member mentioned NAIT and SAIT. There's no yes to that, and there's no no to it as yet, so perhaps NAIT was a little premature in that regard.

9:30

Having said all of that, we know areas where we need to expand. We know that we need to expand in the apprenticeship program, but are we expanding in the right places? Are the students in the right places? Are they able to access in the right geographic areas? We're going to be moving forward with a lot of that due diligence and have been doing so over the last several months.

The hon. member mentioned some of the programs that we're currently working on. As an example, we have the Bow Valley

expansion that is currently under way. Grant MacEwan College, Robbins health, I mentioned. There's the Keyano College sport and wellness centre, the Lakeland Lloydminster campus expansion. We are working with NAIT, actually, on some expansion of the apprenticeship training, their centre for apprenticeship technologies. We are working on a plan for the northern part of the province for trades expansion. We're working with Olds College on their equine centre of innovation, community learning campus; with Portage College, the Cold Lake campus; with Red Deer College, trades expansion.

Of course, we have a number of other larger projects that were announced, like the Edmonton clinic, the University of Calgary health research innovation centre, which I mentioned earlier, the University of Calgary Taylor digital library, University of Lethbridge Alberta water and environmental science building, and quite a number of other smaller projects, as I'm sure the hon. member can relate to. But in terms of how we develop the plan, that's the process that we are currently involved in parallel with the roles, responsibilities, mandate framework that we're talking about.

The Chair: The hon. member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Concerning deferred maintenance and the problem of the condition of a lot of the buildings, particularly at our universities, if you take the University of Calgary, for instance, they're facing what they believe is a \$300 million deferred maintenance bill. Does the minister accept that that's a roughly accurate number and that there is a serious problem with deferred maintenance or maintenance overall? I'm wondering if the minister can tell us what proportion of the capital budget is going to maintenance, if there is something specifically set aside for that, and is this problem going to get worse before it gets better.

There's a lot of building going on right now, but I'm a little concerned that there's not that much being put into existing buildings. Is this something that the universities and colleges have to take out of their existing budget, or is this something for which we can expect some additional money from the government so that they can catch up and improve the condition of some of the buildings that the students are in right now? While the new buildings are great and they're going to be great when they're finished, there are a lot of problems with some of the existing buildings. I think my friend over here will ask a few questions later on about the situation in Calgary.

I wonder if the minister, again, could tell us what proportion of the capital budget is going to maintenance and if he sees this as a significant long-term problem and what his approach to solving this problem is.

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Chairman, one of the priorities that our Premier has enunciated I think very, very well is that deferred maintenance in all areas of the province's infrastructure is a key issue for us to work on. Our budget for the three years on the IMP funding for the various buildings and other areas that are not actually part of the renovation, where we're actually putting dollars into, is about \$107 million over the three years. Do I think that's enough? No. And I think the institutions would probably agree that it needs to be added to.

Again I go back to the budget announcement. Two-thirds of the surplus dollars, if there are surplus dollars, are already budgeted to be put into the capital account mostly for deferred maintenance. It's our intent – and the Premier has said many times – that you can build all the brand new buildings you want, but if you don't take care of the ones that are already out there, you're going to have longer term problems. So we are looking towards the coming years

and getting as much of that deferred maintenance taken care of as we possibly can.

Mr. Tougas: Is there a number in the budget?

Mr. Horner: Yeah. It's \$107 million over three years.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. From the outset of the discussions and questions I want to make it very clear that I am not, nor are any members of my Liberal caucus, suggesting a Peter/Paul scenario, that the U of C should do well at the expense of the U of A, that the University of Lethbridge get more funding than Medicine Hat College, and so on. So I want to put that notion to rest.

I do want to champion the needs of the University of Calgary, which I represent as the MLA for Calgary-Varsity. I had an opportunity to discuss through Public Accounts the concerns – and these were raised as well by Conservative colleagues from Calgary – of the discrepancies in funding between the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary. I am very aware that the University of Alberta is an older institution, but I would like to indicate that the University of Calgary has a number of buildings that are now 41 years of age, so that aging infrastructure is definitely a factor in terms of the maintenance that my hon. colleague mentioned previously.

Now, the University of Calgary's difference is basically \$1,200 per student less than what the University of Alberta receives, and when you add up the total student population and multiply it by that \$1,200, the figure you arrive at is close to \$350 million. Acknowledging the fact of age, acknowledging the fact that there are different programs, such as the University of Alberta having a dentistry program, the University of Calgary does need greater support.

In terms of its priorities I had a chance last week during our constituency week to meet with Donna Mastel, government relations, and Roman Cooney, who is a strong advocate of the University of Calgary. They asked me to bring forward their top priority, and that is \$283 million for 600,000 square feet for the ISEEE building, and that's the Institute for Sustainable Energy, Environment and Economy, and an additional \$40 million for phase 1 of the experiential learning centre to address critical science lab safety deficiencies. Among the discussions we had was the fact that the province has suggested that we would have 15,000 new spaces by this fall and 60,000 new spaces overall throughout all the postsecondary institutions by 2020. Any assurances that I could bring back to the University of Calgary with regard to the acknowledgement of the \$350 million portion of their \$1.5 billion needs list – and notice that I didn't call it a wish list; I called it a needs list – would be very appreciated.

I would also like to bring forward questions about the downtown campus concept. The University of Calgary, Mount Royal, Bow Valley College, and SAIT have all expressed a desire to have a combined sort of education shopping mall, basically, in downtown Calgary. Lance Carlson, who represents the Alberta College of Art and Design, wants to preserve the uniqueness of his academic college of art but would like to be in an area where potentially shared facilities like food services could be shared.

Another one of the exciting parts of this downtown campus, which hopefully the government will support, is the idea of student dormitories. If we have a sufficiently large high-rise of dormitories, that would not only address the student housing issues, provide extra classroom space, which is absolutely essential, but it could also be a partial answer to the affordable housing crisis by having dormito-

ries partially occupied as affordable housing for not only the students but people working and living in the downtown area.

9:40

There has also been recent discussion about extending degree-granting capabilities to Mount Royal. In general the Liberal Party supports the idea of Mount Royal university as well as Mount Royal College, but there is the minimum expectation that the peer review processes that go into establishing the academic credentials be met. In discussions, for example, at Grant MacEwan, Grant MacEwan welcomed 32 different peer reviews to support their applied degree programs, and I'm sure that Mount Royal would undertake a similar circumstance.

I know that both Mount Royal and Grant MacEwan, for example, are much needed for nursing – we have a medical shortage – so any check-offs, any information I can bring back with regard to the downtown campus, with regard to the \$350 or \$1,200 per head discrepancies, and any future addressing of those problems, either in this budget or projected budgets, I would be very pleased to hear and look forward to.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I welcome the participation of the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity. Certainly, I've had a number of discussions with the institutions in Calgary, and in terms of this issue around taking the total amount of grants, the total number of students, dividing it up, and then making the comparison, I'm sure the hon. member would agree that the funding, the mechanisms by which we teach, the course load that they take are all very, very complicated. It would be very simplistic to do that. It comes out with a nice easy number, but it doesn't make any sense. It's not a valid number.

One of the problems that you have is that the U of A has a number of high-cost programs that, quite frankly, are not even offered at the U of C, which contribute to the higher cost per student. An example would be dentistry at \$69,000 per FLE. Agriculture is even at \$17,000 per FLE and forestry at \$23,600. I'm sure that the hon. member would agree that you can't take that and just compare it straight across. The other thing is there are more students at the U of A, considerably more students. You mentioned the older buildings at the U of A, and that is a concern, given the maintenance costs of those buildings and their replacement. About 34 per cent of the U of A's buildings were built before 1960 and only about 17 per cent on the Calgary campus.

That's not to say that Calgary doesn't need more spots. It does. We are working with the University of Calgary, with Mount Royal College. We just did some announcements there earlier this year as well as with Bow Valley on their expansions. In fact, Bow Valley College right now is in phase 1 of what will turn out to be something in the range of a \$58 million expansion. We have already dollars set aside for their expansion into phase 2. Obviously, as has been mentioned in the House earlier, there may have to be a little bit of reconsideration of what that expansion might be, given current costs. But there's already an allocated amount for Bow Valley to expand there.

Certainly, when you look at the ISEEE building, I agree. It's certainly one of the higher priorities in our department right now, trying to figure out how best to see how we might be able to work together with the U of C and perhaps other partners in bringing forward a solution to their issue.

The hon. member mentioned the urban campus. Really, again, I want to go back to how we are planning on working with the

institutions in terms of: let's identify what the need is; let's identify what our current inventory is; then let's identify how we fill those gaps, whether that be by infrastructure or by spots. We have roughly around 140,000, 150,000 students participating in our postsecondary system today. That's a lot of spots, and the reality is: is saying that we're going to create a certain number of spots the right way to go, or is it better to do it in a collaborative, co-operative method, with all the institutions sitting at the table helping us plan what the future of Campus Alberta is going to look like?

The urban campus is a very interesting concept. How it fits into that Campus Alberta approach and the entire plan is what we're working on right now. It looks like there's certainly some opportunity there for P3s. You mentioned the housing. I think there's a prime opportunity there for some energetic institutions to look at the possibility of creating some housing spaces, student dormitories, through a P3 opportunity.

The hon. member mentioned Mount Royal College and the degree granting that they've been requesting. I'm sure he's aware that they do have now degree-granting capabilities. In fact, they are on a pathway that I think will fulfill their desires as we are trying to create the framework around which the institutions will define their niche and define their role and define what they're going to do for this Legislature because this government and we as representatives are watching the dollars that we send to those institutions. It has to be based on what the students need and what Alberta needs. I think Mount Royal College is agreeable to working with us in that way and on the pathway.

He may also be aware that earlier this year we announced 200 new nursing spots at Mount Royal College as well as an additional 200 spots at Grant MacEwan. We are working to address the space requirements in the health care sector, and Mount Royal and Grant MacEwan and other institutions around the province are all playing a part in that. Again, it goes to that holistic Campus Alberta approach, looking to what is the need for the province and then trying to meet that as a collective group, keeping some autonomy in each of those institutions so they can grow and flourish in a direction that their boards want them to go.

The other side of this. The hon. member mentioned, you know, peer reviews and this sort of thing. My goal is to ensure that we have a seamless, highly transferable system in play for our students that is high quality, that's affordable. Those are some pretty heavy goals. The department that I have is well suited to hit those goals because we have a great team, and we have a good plan in place in terms of these roles and responsibilities.

One last comment on the funding side of it. I think, you know, the hon. member would agree that it's difficult to make that kind of comparison between U of A and U of C, but having said that, we have a government funding to postsecondary review every five years. In 2005 that review did lead to an equity readjustment for several institutions, including the University of Calgary. There was an equity adjustment at that time of about \$2.7 million in ongoing funding.

Having said that, in our roles and responsibilities framework and those goals that we set out and the needs analysis and a lot of the stuff that we're talking about moving towards as a group with the institutions, I think it's generally accepted that we're going to have to look at the overall way that we fund institutions today and see if that's going to meet the needs of tomorrow in the Campus Alberta framework. I have given the commitment to a number of the institutions that we are more than willing to take a look at that and see if there's a better way for us to do things.

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

Mr. Tougas: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Since we do have some members of the University of Alberta Students' Union here, I'd like to ask a few questions about student finances now. Goal 1 of the business plan states that a desired outcome is: "Financial need is not a barrier to participating in the advanced learning system, and financial assistance is available to students to support a seamless system." I'd like to know from the minister: how far away do you think the system is from achieving this outcome, where financial need is no longer a barrier? It seems to me that it's always going to be a barrier at some point. Is it really an attainable goal?

The government has also made some moves towards improving student tuition affordability. Unfortunately, tuition fees remain in regulation, not legislation. I know that this is not strictly a budget item, but is there any interest on the government side in returning tuition to legislation? I was told by some students that during your party's leadership campaign the current Premier expressed an interest to returning tuition to legislation, at least as a possibility. I'm wondering if you could address that as well.

I have a question about specific line items in the budget. Line 3.0.3, bursaries and grants: last year it was apparently underspent by several millions of dollars; only 70 per cent of the budgeted amount was spent. Line 3.0.4, student loan relief benefit: less than half of the budgeted amount was spent. I'm wondering if the minister has any thoughts as to why this money is going unused. Is it a matter of not promoting it properly, or is it just that people don't know it's there? It's curious to me that there would be money left over in something that is as important as that.

Since I do have a number of other topics that I'd like to cover, and the Member for Calgary-Varsity also has some other questions, I think I'd just like to end right there and see if I could get some answers from you on those questions.

9:50

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. The affordability framework came forward, and in my meetings with the students' union executives, CAUS and ACTISEC, I asked them: what would be the most important things that we could do? We can't do it all at once. I think everyone would recognize that some things take some time. This is the first year of a three-year plan on the affordability framework, and I think we've come quite a ways. One of the things that they told me was: "The cost of living hasn't been changed in a long, long time. You need to bump it up, and it needs to be more than 10 per cent." We did that.

The other thing that we talked about is that, you know, sometimes there are stupid little rules out there. As a father of two individuals who are either going or have gone to a postsecondary, I knew that they had to drive on the roads a fair bit. It didn't make a lot of sense to me that we would limit students to driving old junkers because I guess that didn't denote a need or something to that effect. I thought it was a stupid rule anyway, so we got rid of that, which the students also agreed with me on.

We introduced an increase to the annual student loan limits. It's important to note in Alberta the remission rate that we use on the loans, where it's quite likely and quite feasible that at the end of a student's student career, the loans that they're going to be left with are only, actually, the federal portion, which we have really no control over. A lot of what we provide is in the bursaries and the grants program.

Tuition in regulation versus legislation. I've talked to all of the student councils about that and talked to them about some of the reasons why I think maybe that's not such a bad idea. Either way

I've given them a very firm commitment from this ministry that if there was ever going to be some consideration to changing the way we're doing things now, they would be definitely consulted in that respect. I think that when one looks at tuition and the tuition policy that we have today, it will only get better and better and better in Alberta as other jurisdictions start to surpass us even more than they have already given the limit to the increase that we've done, whereas in other provinces and other jurisdictions there are no limits, and things have been moving quite steadily onward.

The hon. member brings up an interesting point on the student relief and the unused portions of that relief. All of the changes in the affordability framework that we're working on are to actually help students see that as a good program. An investment in one's education is the best investment they will ever make in their lifetime. Certainly, if we have a way to help them make that investment, we want to do that.

The student relief program: quite frankly, if the students don't apply for it, it goes unused. That is what has happened in some cases in some years. You see ebbs and flows in how it works. We had a limited amount of uptake in some of these programs. Granted, the strong economy may have something to do with that. There may be other areas of finance that students are accessing, and they may feel that perhaps it was too complicated and didn't want to get involved in it. We're working on the entire process of applying for the student loan. I'm actually quite excited by some of the things that I've seen in terms of the IT that we're going to employ to help students understand better their needs analysis that's done by the student finance system.

Again, hon. member, this is a joint project that we're working on with the federal government, and we have to be cognizant of what they want just as much as what we want and certainly be cognizant of what's easiest for the students.

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

Mr. Tougas: Yes. Just going back to the cost-of-living increase that you discussed earlier, is this something that we can expect to see on a regular basis? Are there annual reviews of the amount of money for students that you were talking about before, or is this kind of a one-time thing? Do you look at it every two or three years, every year? Can you just expand a little bit on that, please?

Mr. Horner: Well, obviously, Mr. Chairman, in the affordability framework report that came forward, 14 per cent was not the number that was in the report. The cost-of-living increase: obviously, in Alberta the cost of living is going up, and I would like to see that increased. We'll have to see, going through the next budget process, how successful we are at doing that. But I also think there are other ways we might be able to help students as well that were in the affordability framework, and I would like to introduce some of those as well, if I can, in our next two- and three-year plan so that we get a balance of the entire affordability framework and not just concentrate on one certain thing. We want to get a balance so that we catch as many of those students in need as we possibly can.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. Just one of the benefits of the urban campus that I didn't previously refer to is the fact that not only would it provide more spaces for students and have that flexibility and interaction from one institution to another, as you mentioned, with the Campus Alberta concept; it would provide a possibility of allowing students who did not necessarily have the high grade point

averages to have an opportunity to receive a postsecondary education.

What's happening right now with a number of our university requirements is that they're becoming so high as to be almost to the point of elitist, and we're losing a lot of students who have rounded capabilities as opposed to strictly a one-sided grade point average. This isn't just a problem that the University of Calgary is facing although it has been noted that for the last couple of years running that 20 to 25 per cent of eligible students who could afford the tuition and who had the high grades were forced to turn away.

Can the minister give me some kind of sense as to how close to that 15,000 goal that was announced three years ago the government is approaching, and are we on track with our current policies to reach that 60,000 by 2020? Is that still the plan?

Mr. Horner: Well, one has to remember that apprenticeship spaces are also involved in there and that whole side of it. In fact, when you include apprenticeship spaces in all the things that we're doing, we are on track.

I want to go back to what I was talking about a little bit earlier, Mr. Chairman, and that is that we need to develop these spaces and the infrastructure plans and the capital plans based on the need of the province. Yes, it's true that we need more spaces in Calgary, and we're working on that. Undergraduate spaces do need to be expanded, but do they need to be expanded at the universities, or do we need to expand the entire system and feed into that so that the universities can work on the plans that they have and students have access in more than one place?

The hon. member mentioned Mount Royal College, which I don't think is one of the partners in the urban campus at this point in time.

An Hon. Member: They've been on and off.

Mr. Horner: As the member says, they've kind of been on and off on that one.

It's an interesting concept, and there are capital dollars that are out there for other projects that could conceivably – if the institutions decided that that was where they wanted to go, we could sit down and make a deal in that respect too. But having said that, I'm interested in following up on their discussions. I'm interested in the P3 opportunities that the urban campus may present, and over a long period of time perhaps that's an answer.

Twenty-five per cent of eligible students forced to turn away is a difficult thing for me to agree to because I'm not sure where they went. How many of that 25 per cent actually chose a different institution? It's very difficult for us to determine that right now. All we can say is that an offer was made by the institution and the student didn't accept, or the student made an application and there weren't enough spaces. But did that student get turned away, or did that student actually go to another place? Surprisingly enough, at certain times of the year all of a sudden there are spaces open in different places because students didn't go when they said they were going to go or, you know, life changes.

I think that given the new system that we're talking about putting in place in terms of applications, the APAS system, we need to expand that. We need to bring it more in line with what we're talking about in terms of the Campus Alberta approach. We need to ensure that the information goes both ways because it would be critical information for government and for the institutions to do that planning, to do that infrastructure and space planning, if we have an idea as to what the flow is actually doing. If we can get that flow properly documented and the information back and not just to government but to the institutions as well, it'll help us in planning

what we need to do in the future as well as the industry telling us how fast they're filling up their needs so that we can be flexible in how we build the capacity around the Campus Alberta approach. I think it's very, very important that we follow up on those things because remember that tuition is based on cost, and if we can reduce the cost in our postsecondary system, that will help keep tuition down.

10:00

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology, but I will now invite officials to leave the Assembly so the committee may rise and report.

Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 59.02(9)(b) the Committee of Supply shall now rise and report progress.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under its consideration certain resolutions for the departments of Solicitor General and Public Security, Justice and Attorney General, and

Advanced Education and Technology 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.

The hon. Acting Government House Leader.

Ms Evans: Well, thank you very much. We've had a very productive evening, excellent presentations, and I would move now that we adjourn and reconvene tomorrow afternoon at 1 o'clock.

[Motion carried; at 10:03 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1 p.m.]