



Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday evening, May 20, 2008

Issue 22e

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature

First Session

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[Errata, if any, appear inside back cover]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, May 20, 2008

Committee of Supply

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

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

Main Estimates 2008-09

Housing and Urban Affairs

The Chair: I would like to call on the hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs to open the debate.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to present the first budget for Housing and Urban Affairs. I'm especially pleased to see you sitting in the chair tonight. It's great. This is the first time that I've been in committee and been able to address you as chair. It's wonderful.

On behalf of everyone in need of affordable housing we know that basic shelter and personal opportunity is needed as well. I'd like to begin by thanking our Premier, Premier Ed Stelmach, for recognizing housing as a provincial priority. Before I begin, Mr. Chairman, I'd also like to introduce the staff that I have here with me this evening. I have my deputy minister here, Marcia Nelson, who many of you will know. Marcia was in the executive office previously. This is her first position as deputy minister, so I'm pleased that she's here tonight with us. As well, my assistant deputy minister is here, Robin Wigston. Robin Wigston, as well, many of you know through the assistance that he's kindly provided over the years for housing. My chief financial officer is Rai Batra. Rai, as well, people are familiar with. My executive assistant, Tim Morrison, is here with us, too. Also, seated in the gallery is Peggy Korner, who is director of financial planning. Peggy, would you please rise, and the people can just say hi and see who you are. Thanks. And thanks for being here, too.

Mr. Chairman, you know the robust economy that Alberta has had and the growing population we've had resulted in a tighter rental market and higher rents and more people who are chronically or newly homeless. While the housing market is adjusting its pace and its price, the impact of the last few years continues to challenge many working Albertans, seniors, and people with disabilities. At the same time Alberta continues to offer a high quality of life with great opportunities for people. Our unemployment rate of 3.4 per cent in March this year remains Canada's lowest. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation is forecasting 39,500 housing starts for Alberta this year alone. That's amazing. That is one-sixth of Canada's entire total. Alberta has the jobs. We have a growing housing market. Our government and my ministry are working to ensure that all Albertans can share in these advantages.

The ministry is also assisting over 60,000 Albertans through a variety of rent subsidies, supplements, and supports. That is less than 2 per cent of Alberta's population, but it has a huge impact on the individuals and families living in subsidized housing or receiving a rent supplement. Safe housing is urgent for the estimated 7,000 people who are homeless. Over 14,000 senior households are being helped through the seniors' self-contained program, and over 1,600 Albertans are in provincially assisted special-needs housing. We are working to meet the housing needs of Alberta's most vulnerable citizens, and this budget, I believe, Mr. Chairman, will help people. It will help make things much better for people overall.

The Budget 2008 theme is The Right Plan for Today & Tomorrow. In housing rent supplements, subsidized housing, and emergency shelters are meeting the needs of today. Capital funding for new affordable housing, transitional housing, and outreach programs will meet Albertans' needs in the future. Building on The Right Plan for Today & Tomorrow, the Housing and Urban Affairs budget has three main themes. First is capital funding to build new affordable housing units for the future and to repair and maintain existing social housing; second, our renter supports in the form of subsidized social housing and rent supplements that make existing housing affordable by keeping rents at about 30 per cent of income; third, our homeless supports and prevention. We support programs and initiatives that provide shelter to the homeless, help make the transition for them to permanent housing, and help others to stay in their homes or help them move to other accommodation.

Now, the budget for all of this is \$551 million in program operations for 2008-09. This is an increase of \$72 million, or 15 per cent, over the 2007-08 third quarter forecast. Looking at our three budget themes, \$309 million is committed to capital funding for affordable housing. That's an increase of \$30 million, or 11 per cent. This year's capital funding will help create 2,200 additional affordable housing units, and it builds on the 2,100 units targeted last year, Mr. Chairman, and brings us closer to our goal of more than 11,000 units by 2012. Again this year we are allocating \$45 million to create another 300 affordable housing units in Fort McMurray to help ease the housing crunch for workers and their families, who are driving Alberta's economic engine. This year's capital commitment also includes funding for off-reserve aboriginal housing, for maintenance of existing social housing, and the \$100 million promised to Alberta's municipalities as part of a three-year commitment.

Looking at the second budget theme, \$105 million is targeted to provide renter supports in the form of rent supplements and subsidized housing. Funding for rent supplement programs is increased by 40 per cent to \$57.8 million. Alberta has two rent supplement programs, one that supplements landlords, and the other provides the supplement directly to the tenant. Both provide rental accommodation at about 30 per cent of the household income. Forty-seven million dollars provides subsidized social housing and housing for those with special needs.

This budget allocates \$93 million to the third budget theme of homeless support and prevention. Alberta's shelter operators will receive \$38 million this year, which is an increase of \$5 million, or 15 per cent. As well, communities again will share \$6 million for local homeless initiatives.

Funding for local transitional housing initiatives is doubled to \$5 million this year, and I'm pleased to see that transitional housing and support programs is a growing focus in the homeless area of services. This year's funding will help provide housing that helps homeless people receive the treatment and develop the job skills and life skills to have them be placed into permanent housing. In addition, the two-year outreach pilot projects for homeless people continue, still using the \$16 million in funding allocated in 2006.

To help prevent homelessness, the ministry is allocating \$44 million to the homeless and eviction prevention fund, and many people who find themselves in a rent arrears situation also do not have the means to move. The fund helps people get caught up on rent arrears to avoid eviction and helps them pay for damage deposits and the first month's rent if they need to move.

Together it's those three themes – capital funding, renter support, and homeless support and prevention – that account for \$507 million of my \$551 million department program expense. The rest includes the costs of delivering housing programs and for the new Alberta

Secretariat for Action on Homelessness. In addition to the \$551 million expense to be voted, the ministry has statutory expenses of \$96.7 million for the Alberta Social Housing Corporation's total program expenses. After interministry consolidation adjustments are deducted, the ministry's consolidated program expense is \$574 million. An additional \$20.4 million has been allocated for statutory debt servicing costs for the Alberta Social Housing Corporation, which brings the ministry's total consolidated expense to \$594.8 million. These statutory amounts are provided pursuant to the legislation, and they do not require approval of the Legislative Assembly.

The theme, *The Right Plan for Today & Tomorrow*, underlines the need for planning to guide our funding allocations. The Housing and Urban Affairs business plan provides that guide. The plan and budget continue to implement recommendations accepted from the Alberta Affordable Housing Task Force. Our first goal, first core business, and biggest budget commitment is affordable housing for those most in need: lower income families, seniors, and people with special needs. This includes the funding commitments to capital and to renter supports. But our affordable housing strategies go beyond just money, Mr. Chairman. My staff and I will continue to work to better integrate government planning and housing policy and coordinate services. We will support innovative partnerships and solutions, including promoting the best practices that already prove their value.

I'm looking forward to the discussion, and thank you very much.

7:40

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie. The first 20 minutes.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is my pleasure to rise and join the debate on estimates for the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, and my thanks to the minister for that overview of the budget. With the minister's buy-in we'll do a back and forth in 20-minute chunks if we can for the next little while. Good. The minister is indicating that that's fine by her. Mr. Chairman, we'll proceed on that basis if that's fine with you. Okay.

Everybody needs a home, and home is more than emergency shelters. Home is more than a mat on a church basement floor. Home is more than transitional housing although transitional housing can be a very vital step in the process depending on the circumstances of the individual or the family that we're discussing. I think that the creation of this department dedicated primarily to providing affordable housing and solutions for homelessness was a good move on the part of the government, and I commend them for that.

I think this budget is, as I read through it and break it down, certainly a very good start, but as I'm sure the minister will agree with me, there is much work to be done over the next few years. Some of what I'm going to talk about tonight or ask about tonight will have to do with plans going forward in this fiscal year and fiscal years beyond that. Some of it will have to do with targets established already and whether those targets have been met or not.

We are looking at three key components here: the \$309 million for affordable housing capital grants, the \$57.8 million for the rent supplement program, and the \$44 million for the homeless and eviction prevention fund. There are other things, of course, that I want to discuss as well, but those are three key areas that I want to focus in on.

I'd like to start with the rent supplement program because if you look in the budget at page 258 of the estimates, line item 2.4.1, you'll see that the 2008-09 estimate is \$57.8 million, which is up

substantially from the '07-08 forecast of \$41.3 million, which in itself was up substantially from the estimate at the beginning of that fiscal year of \$24.3 million. The year before, the government spent \$18.7 million on that program. In supplementary supply an extra \$10 million was requested for this program in addition, I believe, to a previous supplementary supply of \$9 million. This thing is growing like Topsy, and I'm hoping that the minister can convince me that there's actually an end in sight to this.

I have a few questions around rent supplements, the first of which is: I would like an explanation and a breakdown, if I could, of the supplements to the landlord and the supplements to the tenant, how the determination is made as to which supplement goes where in what circumstances. Of your budget how many dollars go to supplements to the landlord? How many dollars go to supplements to the tenant directly? Can you explain the difference between those two supplement programs? I think I'm going to sit down right now and get an answer to that question because the answer will help determine where we go from here.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I agree with the member opposite. You know, I'm really pleased, too, that this ministry has been established. I also agree with you that we are doing good work and that there is a lot more that has to be done. Part of the good work is the three programs that you've mentioned here. You mentioned it when you said the \$309 million capital funding, when you mentioned the \$58.7 million for the rent supplement program and the \$44 million for the homeless eviction prevention fund.

Now, your question was: why is it growing? I know you may think that this is a simplistic response, but the reason is that we do have a number of people that have moved to the province of Alberta over the past two or three years. With the economic boom we've had a population boom. Not all people that have come to the province purchased a home prior to coming here. Many have come to the province. Some have brought their families; some have come individually for employment. We know that, as you mentioned, the shelter program does help people to be off the street, but it's not a home.

Many people that came here, as I said, did not have enough income to establish themselves. We have programs in place, which are the ones you mentioned, through the rent supplement where we will provide the first month's damage deposit; we'll provide the first month's rent. We'll assist people with other support services as we know that 40 per cent of the people that are in our homeless shelters are from other provinces. They're working. They're not from the province of Alberta. And that is with each year.

But we recognized, too, that we needed two rent supplement programs because they're helping 8,500 lower income households by keeping rents to 30 per cent of their income. And across the province, as I mentioned earlier, we do have the delivery of the program. I think that you were asking about how we deliver that program. We have 44 management bodies that deliver the programs, and they assess applications on an individual basis.

One subsidy program pays the difference in rent to the landlords, as you had mentioned, hon. member, and that has been in place for 15 years. The new direct rent supplement program provides subsidies. You'd asked how many Albertans. I think that that program provides a subsidy directly to 3,600 Albertans. We have about 60,000 Albertans in over 35,000 affordable housing units. They'll benefit from \$105 million this year for rent supplements, and that's for what some people will term social housing.

Rent supplement programs received a 40 per cent increase, as you

mentioned, this year. That is a 40 per cent increase to the \$58.7 million that you referred to in the program, and the supplements keep rents at 30 per cent of income for 8,500 households as a whole. The providers received \$47 million for operations to provide almost 27,000 subsidized units to 50,000 lower income Albertans or those with special needs.

I think I'll stop there, Mr. Chairman, because that's answered a few of your questions. I know that, as you said, there will be more.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just to summarize, if I got it correctly, there's an ongoing rent supplement program that has been in effect for a number of years now – I believe the minister said 15 – that is essentially the provision of social housing. Am I right about that? The minister has indicated that I am. Okay. And then there are about 3,600 tenants who are receiving supplements directly. Okay. Does the minister expect the direct supplement to tenants to increase in terms of the number of tenants served over the next year, two years, three years?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, Mr. Chairman, given the increase in the number of people that would access the rent supplement program, I would expect that in the short term, but in the longer term no. The reason I say that is because, as we've discussed before in the Assembly, hon. member, we are working toward having 11,000 affordable housing units in place over a five-year period. We're on track with that. In fact, if the municipalities who have put forward the number of applications they have for affordable housing units actually follow through with that, we would have 3,400 affordable housing units this year, and that puts us ahead of the 2,100 that we had anticipated. It's a guesstimate, you know, overall, about how much it will increase. You asked for the three-year window, much like we do our business plans, but I would expect this line item for rent supplement to stay in the business plan over that three-year period.

Mr. Taylor: I just heard a very big "if" there. If everyone who has said that they want to build affordable housing goes ahead and builds affordable housing or has started to build affordable housing, then we would have 3,400 units in some stage of completion or progress at this point, which would be well ahead of your own target from last year of 2,100. But it sounds as though you don't know whether we're dealing with 2,100 units or 3,400 units or somewhere in between or, in fact, perhaps even fewer than 2,100 units. How many units of affordable housing have actually been built in the last 12 months?

7:50

Mrs. Fritz: Mr. Chairman, we know that when you communicate and you say what you're saying, the person listening may hear it in a different way. I didn't say: if the municipalities and the 3,400 applications, if those were made. Those have been made. Municipalities throughout the province of Alberta made application to the department in order to have capital dollars to build units. But given the way in which construction costs have escalated, there's been a change, you know, with some municipalities in how they'd like to deliver those units. There are hundreds of applications, but in order for that to follow through, I'd have to give you a finite answer and say: yes, we're going to have exactly this 3,400 at the end of the year. It could be more; it could be less. That's just the way it is. But we do have a goal of 2,100 units, and I know that we will definitely reach that goal. For this year the expectation is that definitely there will be 2,100 units built.

Mr. Taylor: Could I ask the minister how she is tracking this or how her ministry is tracking this? We are talking now about \$309 million in affordable housing capital grants, and I think the taxpayer would like to know, as worthy a cause as this is – and you're never going to get an argument from me about that – that when your department hands out the money, you're tracking it to make sure that the applications for construction actually result in units on the ground that people who are struggling to find a home can live in. So, again, how is the minister tracking this?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There's a well-established technology program in place that the department does use, but there are also in place plans from municipalities. The plans come in. There's an agreement that's established, and in that agreement the funding is allocated every few months once the municipality has indicated, you know, a certain level of their construction, and further funding can be allocated once they reach different levels in the full agreement process. It's a very detailed agreement, and I know that the department works with every municipality on every agreement in order to ensure that that housing is actually being built and that it's being kept on track.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. If I might, I'd like to ask the minister if she could provide perhaps more written details about that because I'm still a little vague. I understand that it's a detailed program, but I'm still a little vague as to how it actually works. I get the notion that there's some money paid up front, that there's some money paid at a certain stage of completion, and that there's money paid at substantial completion, just like if you and I were renovating our houses. We'd do the same sort of thing. But I'm still not clear as to whether the ministry can tell me or can tell the taxpayer at any moment in time how many units are complete, are substantially complete, are half-way through, are just digging the hole for the basement, et cetera, et cetera. Correct me if I'm wrong, but it does not seem to be an unreasonable expectation on the part of the taxpayer that the ministry could deliver that information whenever they're asked.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd be pleased to do that. I know that in the agreements with the municipalities, as I said before, there are, you know, the number of units, as you indicated as well, with the funding in stages. The agreements are very formal. I'd be pleased, you know, to talk further with you at another date.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you. Back to rent supplements now. The minister indicated that the rent supplement program is going to continue as a line item in each of the next three years of the ministry's business plan. What she hasn't indicated yet is whether the dollars are going to stay relatively constant, whether they're going to continue to escalate at the rate that they have been escalating since 2006-2007, whether we're going to see a drop-off in that figure at any time in the next three years, or whether she anticipates that that will happen a little bit later. The reason why I ask this is because the evidence is overwhelming that rents continue to increase even though – even though – we have seen I'll call it a slowdown, for lack

of a better word, an easing off on the gas, perhaps, in real estate activity in a number of Alberta centres over the last few months.

We have not yet seen any positive impact that I'm aware of from the perspective of renters on rents. We're not seeing a significant or measurable increase in the number of units available for rent sufficient to start bringing down rents or to even bring down the rate of increase in rents. If rents continue to increase, and one infers from that, of course, that supply is taking too long – I guess that's as good a way to put it – to catch up with demand, then the obvious question is: how much longer is the government going to stick with the rent supplement program, and what is the final bill going to be? Let me do a quick bit of math here. It's already running at about \$60 million a year. Over three years that's \$180 million. Over four years it's \$240 million, and so on and so forth. Is this going to continue to go until we hit half a billion? A billion? Two billion? Who knows?

Give me some indication of what the future looks like for the rent supplement program and when the minister expects that she'll have addressed the supply problem successfully enough that she won't have to put more money into the rent supplement program but, in fact, will be talking about less money.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think it was last Friday in Calgary I met with the Calgary Apartment Association. The Calgary Apartment Association has worked hard on a program that I know you're familiar with, hon. member, called the new start program. It was anticipated through that program that they would assist with a thousand apartments on the market, a thousand apartments coming forward for people that are chronically homeless, that have low to moderate income, to assist them with accommodation. In turn, that person, the individual that was being rented to, through the new start program we would look at what their income was and then provide a subsidy related to 30 per cent of that income. So when you say that there hasn't been anything come forward – I trust what they've told me. They've said that it will be a thousand units this year, by October, in fact. They knew that they would have those units coming forward, but the reason that they said that is because they had anticipated that the vacancy rate would be very low, like half a per cent, whereas now they're finding in Calgary that the vacancy rate is 3 to 4 per cent.

The market is changing overall. There's a softening of the market. That leads to more housing being developed and people just moving through the continuum of housing in a much quicker way. Can I tell you that it will be – I think you said half a billion dollars in three years. In fact, I know that, no, it wouldn't be half a billion dollars for the rent supplement program in three years.

Mr. Taylor: Well, I didn't actually say it would be. I asked if it would be. I threw out a number of numbers there, and the reason for doing that was to try and get an estimate from the minister as to when we'll see, you know, the curve start to point down again. We've seen a dramatic increase in the number of dollars going into the rent supplement program since 2006-2007, and I'm wondering how many more years it's going to be before we start to see that number decline. I'm wondering if the minister can give me an estimate of whether it's six months, six years, 60 years. You know, just give me an estimate. That's all I'm after.

8:00

Mrs. Fritz: Well, as I explained earlier, Mr. Chairman, we have a program in place for affordable housing of 11,000 units by 2012.

We're well ahead of that, and we'll continue, I believe, to be well ahead of that. As you bring affordable housing units on the market, you have less need for rent supplement programs overall because of the affordability of the homes and as people move into those homes. I would think that within the next three years you will see the rent supplement program decreasing.

Mr. Taylor: Does the minister agree with the notion that if this government had employed the legislative mechanism of temporary rent controls, temporary rent caps, to stabilize rent fairly until the market responded, in fact, she could have already saved the taxpayers a fair number of millions of dollars that have been spent on the rent supplement program?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll just answer that question very briefly because, as you know, the area that the member is referring to is with Service Alberta. We also know that the Minister of Service Alberta has said in the past that experience in Alberta and other jurisdictions had found that rent controls were counterproductive over the long term and that they limit the investment in new rental construction and make it harder for landlords to maintain and upgrade their rental properties. That, overall, can have a negative impact on rental availability, the vacancy rates, and the maintenance of the rental units.

The vacancy rates, as I said earlier, are improving in some major Alberta centres in recent months. However, we know that many Albertans still face challenges with rental increases as a result of the economic growth in the province. That's why we created the direct rent supplement program, to help lower income Albertans with higher rents, and then I mentioned the 11,000 affordable housing units. As I said, the rent control policy is with Service Alberta.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Yes, that is true, that it would be Service Alberta's jurisdiction. Nevertheless, I think it is something that deserves to be placed on the record when we're talking about the estimates of the Department of Housing and Urban Affairs. In fact, I'll probably have a question or two if I have time later about why certain things that seem to me to make sense to be under the umbrella of the Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs live in other departments. Rent controls, or rent caps, whatever you want to call them, would be one of those things.

I want to make it very clear that the Alberta Liberal policy is a temporary rent cap capping rent increases at 10 per cent per year, which any true believer in long-term rent control, including, I'm sure, my hon. colleague from the third party, would be shocked and gobsmacked about because it's not real rent control at all. I mean, you know, 10 per cent increases in rent in a year? When the market is working the way it's supposed to, which it does about 18, 19 years out of 20, a 10 per cent rent increase, if a landlord actually tried to do that, would be unheard of. The tenant would say: no, I'm going to take the vacant apartment across the street. In fact, for about 18 out of the last 20 years that's exactly what we've seen in Calgary and Edmonton, that kind of power, consumer power, in the hands of the tenant as opposed to the landlord.

Despite what the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview had to say, I do have some sympathy for people who have rental properties, not a huge amount but some. Nevertheless, our policy is designed to do one thing and one thing only, and that's stop the kind of rent gouging that we have seen from the bad-apple landlords, of

which there are a few. Many landlords are great people. Many landlords are small landlords who are salt of the earth people, who would rather take well below what the market would justify or allow in terms of a rent increase in conditions like this for the sake of getting a good, stable, long-term tenant that they could build a good landlord-tenant relationship with. I've got a number of landlords like that sprinkled all throughout my constituency of Calgary-Currie.

There are many, many, many great landlords out there and a few rotten apples, a few pirates, a few privateers who use an overheated economy like this, with a housing shortage, as an excuse to put people's rents up 100, 200, 300 per cent. That's the kind of rent gouging that I believe government needs to step in and prevent as a temporary measure while we're working on delivering those 11,000 or – who knows? – maybe you'll exceed the target and hit 15,000 units of affordable housing over the next four years. If you do, good on you. But temporary rent caps.

I know that the minister of the Treasury Board back in his previous job in which he also had Service Alberta as part of his portfolio has argued passionately that long-term rent controls skew the marketplace. They do. Anybody who has ever lived in a rent-controlled jurisdiction where rent controls have lasted for a long time knows this to be true. Long-term rent controls subsidize tenants. Long-term rent supplements subsidize landlords. This is why I've been questioning when we're going to see the curve start to turn down in terms of the amount of tax dollars we're putting into rent supplement programs. Just like rent caps, as opposed to funding for social housing, rent supplements should be a temporary measure to get everybody through until there's an adequate supply of affordable housing again. The landlord hurts a little, the tenant hurts a little, but nobody hurts too much, and everybody has a home. That's why I asked the question about rent control.

I think that the amount of money, \$57.8 million, in the rent supplement program this year reflects the size of the affordable housing crisis in Alberta, that so many people need assistance with their rents. I wonder if the minister would agree with that statement.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just a brief comment back to the meeting with the Calgary Apartment Association. I know that you mentioned the increases would be 10 per cent or above this year. They had let the ministry staff and myself know that for the rental increases this year they're finding that the projection is between 5 to 8 per cent. So it could be as low as 5 per cent. They're anticipating that it would be as high as 8 per cent.

On the area of 100 per cent to 300 per cent increases in rents that you were concerned about, there is a tenant protection act – and I know you won't like to hear this – that is back with the Service Alberta ministry.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you. Tenant protection acts do not necessarily protect, as is the case with so much legislation. Legislation doesn't always protect the people that need the protection the most. If there's a requirement that they go through the process of getting legal representation or jumping through a lot of hoops, they don't have the resources that MLAs have, for instance, that oil company people have, that all kinds of people have. There's no question that a great number of Albertans are doing phenomenally well these days, but those who aren't are really not doing phenomenally well at all.

8:10

Let's talk, if we can, for a minute about emergency and transitional shelter support. The minister on line 2.3.1 on page 258 of the estimates commits \$38 million to emergency and transitional shelter support this year, up from a forecast amount of just about \$33 million in '07-08 and a budgeted amount of just under \$31 million for that year. I guess I'm looking here for a bit of a breakdown: how much to emergency shelters, how much to transitional support, what kind of transitional support, what kind of specific solutions to address the needs of those who are chronically homeless, who are chronically hard to house. As the minister and I have both agreed already, emergency shelters are not homes. Transitional housing is the closest thing to a home that some people probably can ever hope for, but it's a darn sight better than an emergency shelter. For others it should be just a step along the way, maybe not even a necessary step on the way to permanent housing. So a breakdown, please, between the amount of money going to emergency shelters and whether that includes opening any new ones and the amount of money going to transitional housing and what sorts of transitional housing projects and programs we're looking at in 2008-2009.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As the member mentioned, this program provides support to homeless shelters and they, in turn, provide safe and secure accommodation in emergency shelters and/or transitional housing. That's because many of the emergency shelters provide transitional housing as well, transitional spaces. It's usually between 20 and 30 per cent of what you hear are the emergency shelter beds. So we continue to support 3,160 spaces. As I have said earlier in the Assembly, it's in 31 facilities that are located across the province. Those are in Calgary, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Lloydminster, High Level, and Red Deer. Then additional funding was also provided to communities for the winter contingency fund, that we had discussed earlier in the Assembly. That supported an additional almost 1,000 spaces throughout the province.

It was interesting when we had the most recent spring storm. In tracking the shelter spaces every day, which I continue to do, in the spring storm I found it interesting – and I don't know why this happened or if it's an anomaly or not – that the use of the emergency shelter spaces was down considerably. At one point across the province we had 500 shelter spaces in that storm, between 300 to 500. So we are keeping a careful eye on this. But the importance of transitional housing, as you said, can't be underestimated. It's necessary for people, as they move from emergency housing to transitional housing, because transitional housing helps our homeless population develop the life skills for a successful transition from that on to permanent housing.

This budget did provide \$93 million this year, Mr. Chairman, for homeless services and prevention. That's a 10 per cent increase. Shelters are receiving \$38 million, as I said, overall in the 31 facilities. We're also continuing with the \$6 million for the local homeless priorities. This budget doubled the funding for transitional initiatives to \$5 million. Those initiatives were in addition to what we have in place as well, which are the two-year outreach pilot projects. Those were funded back in '06-07.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you. Let me talk about that pilot project and ask just a bit about that for a second because that did start in '06-07. I

believe the minister said in her introduction that it continues on for '08-09, still on the \$16 million originally set aside for that. What's the timeline for deciding whether the pilot project has been a success and, therefore, deciding what to do with it on a going-forward basis and how to fund it?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Ms Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We do, as I said, have the pilot project funding. It was the first time that it had been given to our foundations, that deliver some very good programs. They knew what the need was out in the community and how they would like to address that need. It's always based on local priorities. For example – and you're very familiar with this program as well – the pathways to housing program, the hospital discharge program that's being run by Dr. Pam Thompson and an excellent team of providers, health care providers, that assist a homeless individual from the shelter. You know, the Calgary Homeless Foundation and the drop-in centre let me know that there were at least five people a day in the drop-in centre that were accessing emergency, and the hospital discharge program was put in place as an outreach project in order to meet the individual at emergency and assist them to Housing First and then to support services through this very highly qualified team. We know that that program is working and that they are placing people. They are requesting further funding through the Calgary Homeless Foundation, which we fund for homeless initiatives. This is just one I'm talking about, but there are many throughout Alberta where this is occurring.

So that's the continuum and the steps that are taken with the program. This is an excellent program. It's one that we have under discussion on how we can continue to assist the community with pilot projects and: is this the right venue to continue with this line item in this way or to fit it overall into our other homeless initiative programs that we have in place?

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Okay. The outreach pilot project is a line item in the minister's budget, but really when we wrap our heads around it, we should think of it as a number, as a series of pilot projects that will be evaluated at different points along the road and funding made more permanent or not, depending on how successful each one of those projects was. Correct? Yes. Okay. Thank you.

The minister mentioned Housing First – it rolled off the tongue in passing there – and Housing First, of course, is the model adopted by the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness with their ambitious yet laudable and I think, if properly funded and properly executed, doable goal of effectively ending homelessness in the city of Calgary in 10 years. When we say ending homelessness, I think the minister will agree with me that that's rather like talking about zero unemployment. You never ever quite get to zero. You never ever quite get to absolutely perfect. Even if everybody who was homeless last week has a permanent roof over their heads now and the concurrent support that they need, there will be new people becoming homeless. We just hope to get those numbers down to a very, very low level so that we can say, much like we talk about, you know, under 3 per cent unemployment being effectively zero unemployment, that effectively we get down to eliminating homelessness.

I know the minister is, I think, a big supporter, a big fan, at least in principle, of the 10-year plan to end homelessness and of the Housing First model. I wonder if the minister can talk a little bit about what in her budget this year relates to the Housing First model

and the extent to which her ministry is going to get behind the Housing First model, whether in Calgary or anywhere else, you know, at street level with a real commitment of dollars and cents and feet on the floor, that sort of thing.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to just go back to this Pathways to Housing a bit, to when you were discussing how there can be cost savings overall. I know that Dr. Thompson had mentioned to me when I'd first met her about this project that the cost per client – a Pathways to Housing client is who I'm talking about – was \$30,000 per year, and that included the housing and the support services when it's a Pathways to Housing client, but the year before Pathways was an initiative, the cost to society as a whole was about \$95,000 per year per client in health care costs, legal services, and shelter support.

Your question was about how that fits into the budget now, though. If you continue to go down the elements in your budget book that you have there, they are wrapped into the services that are being provided. Whether it's through transitional housing, through homeless initiatives, it's all encompassed within the budget in different areas, depending on which pilot project. As I mentioned, there are many throughout Alberta, depending on which pilot project it is and how successful that is when the measures are taken of that project. We have many, so I could discuss more with you if you like.

8:20

Mr. Taylor: Could you do the math on your feet – or could you ask members of your ministry if they could do that – and give me sort of a reasonably accurate ballpark figure out of all the numbers in the budget of how many dollars are committed to various forms of Housing First programs? As more of a policy question I'm interested in hearing the minister talk about the extent to which she wants her ministry to get behind the Housing First concept. I'm just suggesting some parameters here – I'm not pinning you down to it – that could include a discussion of what she sees as the benefits beyond the obvious cost savings that she mentioned. She's absolutely right about the phenomenal difference between the cost of keeping somebody homeless as opposed to providing a permanent home for them, an apartment for them along with the support that they need to maintain themselves over the long term in that home. So that's one obvious benefit. I think there are others that the minister would probably want to talk about.

Are there any drawbacks to this program? Is it a little too, for instance, committed to getting everybody into a house or into a permanent home, a permanent housing arrangement without considering maybe some of the special needs of some of the clients? I don't know, and I'm not suggesting that it is. I'm just interested in hearing the minister as a sort of a statement of policy along with that dollar figure that I've asked for, that cumulative dollar figure, give me a sense of the extent to which she wants her ministry to get behind the concept of Housing First going forward.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm very supportive of Housing First as a model. I believe in the organizations and the community as a whole. That's what they've brought forward for us to evaluate, which is what we're doing and back again through these pilot projects.

Yes, I would like to mention another one, and that's the Hope

Mission transitional housing for 18- to 24-year-olds. This project is funded as well, Mr. Chairman, through that \$16 million outreach program, and it will bridge the gap between emergency shelter services and longer term stable housing options for clients aged 18 to 24. Homeless people accessing this project will be provided with 24-hour support services, and it's funded through the transitional housing initiative. That's why I'm mentioning that one. I'd mentioned to you as well the transitional housing initiatives within this budget, which will now, if we measure this as being very, very successful, continue to assist Hope Mission with this transitional housing, and it may even grow.

Another example of transitional housing, an example that I thought was excellent when I heard about it – and I'm very interested in watching how it moves forward – is the Housing First for older adults through Trinity Place Foundation, which you may be familiar with. The Trinity Place Foundation of Alberta focuses on housing older homeless persons, and each new Housing First tenant will receive regular home visits to assist with problem solving to coordinate community support services and just to be assisted overall with the whole social aspect of what they're finding to be gaps with older tenants. They housed I think it was about 18 to 24 people in the months of November and December. That, too, I think will have good success.

Do I support Housing First? Absolutely. I think it's a real strong direction that we could move in, but I'd be unwilling to say that that's going to be it exactly until I hear back from our Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness because there may be some way in which this should be enhanced that we haven't seen yet. Then I would believe that the secretariat would come forward with the amount of funding that we would require in our next budget or the budget after that to assist people through all these numbers of initiatives that the local communities and municipalities have in place.

Mr. Taylor: Still looking for that ballpark figure. Have you got it for me yet, or do you want to get it to me in writing?

Mrs. Fritz: I'll think about it.

Mr. Taylor: She'll think about it. Could I ask that I get it in writing? Would that be possible?

Mrs. Fritz: Yes.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you.

Two more questions on the subject of Housing First. The first one is: does the minister have any estimate of when we might see the number of emergency shelter spaces start to decline in the province of Alberta? One of the goals of Housing First, whether it's practised in Calgary or New York City or wherever, is to actually get enough homeless people out of the shelter and into permanent supportive housing of some arrangement so that they can actually start shutting down shelter space.

We've seen some fairly remarkable numbers come out of some of the cities in the States that have had a Housing First model going and a 10-year plan to end homelessness for a number of years now. New York City comes to mind, for instance. I know that they've made a substantial dent in the number of emergency shelter spaces that they used to have open. Does the minister have any estimate of when we might see the number of shelter spaces in the province of Alberta start to decline?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm hopeful that we will see that within the next year. I know that the counts of our homeless are being conducted in Calgary, for example, in Edmonton, in our municipalities throughout the province, our seven major municipalities. Having said that, the reason why I believe that is because of what I've had the opportunity to see just in the short time I've been in this portfolio, back to what I said about the thousand apartments in Calgary with the Calgary Apartment Association.

We did discuss the Boyle renaissance project in the Legislature through question period. That was just announced at the end of April, and that was supportive housing options for up to 1,100 inner-city residents, and it's an incredible project. It's for seniors, for aboriginal people, for high school students to have housing immediately adjacent to a high school, for transitional clients. It's going to provide housing services, health services, education to the inner city. We're seeing that all over the province right now. Municipalities have just really taken it, you know, in the palms of their hands and are carrying it, about what's needed for the community overall. As we see that – and it's happening very quickly – I think one of the first results will be that the need for shelter space will decrease. So I will be very interested when the homeless counts come forward here in I think it's July and in September.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you to the minister for that. It will indeed be, I think, a hopeful day, an exciting day when we start to see that we've reached the point where we can now close shelter spaces for the simple reason that they're no longer needed.

Sort of against that background I ask this next question with, I guess, some mixed feelings because there seems to be a bit of a conflict between the Inn from the Cold organization in Calgary and the Calgary Homeless Foundation. You know, I'm not really sure how to proceed with this question. I don't want to offend either organization because they both have done phenomenal work over the last few years in the city of Calgary.

I do have a strong feeling, as I've said many times, that everybody needs a home. I have a strong feeling that a mat on a church basement floor is not a home, and that in essence is what Inn from the Cold has been providing for homeless families in the city of Calgary for the last several years: church basements and volunteers from church congregations to house homeless families for a night. You know, you usually cycle through I think it's about once every three to four weeks that a church will play host to Inn from the Cold for a night.

Inn from the Cold wants to open a downtown emergency shelter for families. They've raised about \$4 million so far through donations and grants to buy a building owned by the Calgary Drop-in Centre downtown in Calgary in the 100 block of 11th Avenue S.E. I guess the deal will cost \$6 million all told, and they're hoping to be able to close the deal next month. I had some discussions – it would be about three weeks ago now – with Inn from the Cold about this issue, and they had run into a roadblock in terms of raising money. I think part of the roadblock may have been from your ministry. I'm not sure. In any event – and perhaps the minister can clarify that – it did result in them going to the Calgary Homeless Foundation and asking if the Homeless Foundation would contribute to the cause. The Homeless Foundation said no, in part because they don't feel the building is the right fit and in part because the shelter doesn't fit the Housing First model. I, too, am a big supporter of the Housing First model, and I'm a big supporter of getting families out of church basements.

8:30

It seemed to me, as the problem was described to me, that having this emergency shelter for families was a key, kind of, transitional

step in the process. I wonder if the minister can enlighten us as to what's going on here and whether, in fact – I'm not asking her, at least I hope I'm not asking the minister, to take sides in this – there is a need for this kind of family emergency shelter space in downtown Calgary as a stopgap or transitional step?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am familiar with the Inn from the Cold and the very good work that they do. I had an opportunity to meet with them about four to six months ago, and in those discussions the Inn from the Cold had indicated that they were raising funding, capital dollars. I think you said that it's \$4 million that they've raised now, and I think their project is a \$6 million capital purchase of a site. My understanding, too, is that they did apply through the Calgary Homeless Foundation for funding and that the Calgary Homeless Foundation, after reviewing the proposal along with many other proposals that they have in place, viewed the Inn from the Cold proposal to not meet the criteria that they were looking for, and that was sustainability of funding.

I understand that just as things have changed with the continuum of housing and the way that it's being offered now, Inn from the Cold may have housed 60 to 80 families two years ago. Currently what they've put forward as the number of families they're serving on a given night is between two to six to eight. The numbers are just much lower, and I don't know if that is an anomaly or not. I mean, I'm uncertain of that, but I know that those are the numbers that the inn has identified.

The inn has not applied to this ministry for any capital dollars. They have applied through the community spirit program. They've applied, I think, through the community facilities program for capital dollars. I don't know where that is with that ministry at all, but I can let you know. That's the status of where I know the project to be.

Mr. Taylor: Would I be forcing you to take sides if I asked whether you supported the concept of an emergency family shelter in downtown Calgary?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you. I mean, I'm supportive of an emergency shelter for people in need, to help them be off the street, and especially with families, with our youth, with people that need a hand up to get off the street and into transitional housing. Your question, though, was about would I support it being located downtown, and I haven't had that come forward. I'd have to look at the site, look at the location of the site. Is it adjacent to a men's homeless shelter? You know, it would be the location. If it's for children, is it located next to very serious traffic? It would depend on the location of the site downtown.

Mr. Taylor: Fair ball. I think that's a fair answer. The minister and I may talk about this further in the days and weeks to come, I imagine, but thank you for that.

I don't have a whole lot of time left. I'm going to open one more topic for discussion. We'll see how far we get with that in the five minutes that we have remaining. It's the homelessness secretariat. Again, page 258. This time it would be line 2.1.4, the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, budgeted at \$3.8 million this year. Can the minister tell us what initiatives are being discussed by the secretariat? Can the minister tell us what timelines she has imposed on the secretariat for delivery of recommended actions? Can the minister tell us if she's prepared to act on all the secretar-

iat's recommendations or just some of them, as in the case with the Affordable Housing Task Force?

What we're looking for here, quite honestly, Minister, is deliverables. For \$3.8 million tax dollars we want deliverables, not just a planning exercise to have another planning exercise to have another planning exercise. There has been some good work done in various areas on affordable housing and homelessness, some done by this government, some done at the prodding of the opposition members opposite, some done by municipalities, some done by all kinds of groups that have not only had the best of intentions but the will to act on those intentions to the extent that they could. But there have been other times where I've certainly felt that some of the work around affordable housing and homelessness has been busywork, that it's one of those things where it's easy to make plans to make plans to make plans and sometimes difficult to keep everybody's eye on the task at hand, which is to always move to a plan of action.

If the minister could in the time remaining give me some answers to as many of those questions as she can, and maybe give me the other answers in writing. I thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness is an important part in our Premier's plan to provide safe and secure communities. Ten of the 12 members that are on that secretariat are outstanding people in the Alberta community – they really are – and they're working very, very hard. They're meeting every three weeks on this whole issue of homelessness and how they can best meet the needs of the people that are homeless.

The 12 members include First Nations. They include people selected by seven community-based organizations to be their representative. We have our assistant deputy minister as one of the 12 members so that any of the working areas of the secretariat can go through the deputy minister onto the cross-ministry committee that we have with I think it's 12 ministries in place.

The secretariat should develop and implement what I consider to be a 10-year plan. It'll be a plan that's strategic, and it will address homelessness. More importantly, they're going to provide leadership in the development and co-ordination of new initiatives. They will be new, and they'll be based on some of this that we were discussing earlier about the pilot projects. It'll be a whole new direction in – not a whole new direction but a real clear new direction in the way that we approach homelessness. It will be the development and co-ordination. They'll oversee the implementation of the strategic plan. They'll monitor. They'll report regularly on the progress, Mr. Chairman, and they'll outline what's going to be, I consider, a comprehensive, co-ordinated, and sustainable approach to addressing homelessness. They'll outline strategies for addressing the root causes of homelessness that you had mentioned in some of your remarks in a way as well.

Also, I think there have to be measurable goals. There has to be a system of IT, of tracking ways in which organizations can assist someone that's homeless. I've asked the chairman of the secretariat, Steve Snyder, who is familiar with the Calgary 10-year plan from sharing that in that continuity, to report back to my deputy and myself and department officials by the fall of this year.

You had mentioned in question period at one point about what exactly that date will be. I know you may be thinking that this time, too, but it's in the fall. It could be early fall, late fall, but then we're going to give them some latitude to be sure that we have exactly what they want to put forward to the ministry in place, and we'll evaluate it at that time.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think I'm close enough to the end of my time that – oh, I've got one minute left. I'm not going to take it. I'll put myself back on the list, if I can, for later on because there's not much that you can discuss in a minute except a 35-second question in question period, and this ain't it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll cede the floor.

8:40

The Chair: I would now like to recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose.

Ms Notley: Thank you. Like the last speaker, I just want to say that it's a great opportunity to have a chance to get up and speak with you today and ask you a few questions about your ministry. In particular, the fact that the discussion is centred around your ministry as opposed to a portion of a previous ministry is something that I think I can say we're all happy to see, that there is, in fact, a ministry for housing. I hope that, you know, we'll see a more, sort of, co-ordinated and focused effort to deal with issues around affordable housing and homelessness in Alberta. I just want to say as a start that we appreciate the fact that the ministry is in place and that it has its own minister.

I'd like to try and do a little bit of back and forth, like we just witnessed in the last 20-minute blocks, if that's okay. I think I'll start, though, just really quickly – I'll probably refer to this a bit in the course of my questions to you – by describing a little bit of my constituency in Edmonton-Strathcona. I think that it is a tremendous slice of, you know, feet-on-the-ground temperature taking in terms of what's going on out there in terms of affordable housing.

About 65 to 75 per cent of the residents of Edmonton-Strathcona are renters. There's one particular area that I like to talk about when we get into this issue, and it's an area between the university and 99th Street and between about 81st Avenue up to the river valley, to Saskatchewan Drive, that consists primarily of three- to four-storey, 50-year-old walk-ups. For the longest time it had been a tremendous source of affordable housing for people that were moving to Edmonton: for low-income people, for students, for graduate students, for artists, for a whole bunch of people. It's one of the reasons it's been such a vibrant community and, I might even hesitate to put forward, one of the reasons that they are so politically brave and forward thinking in that area. Nonetheless, that's just me.

So that's sort of the area. In the last two or three years we've seen just an absolutely overwhelmingly discouraging transformation in that area. In the course of trying to get elected, I was probably in about 80 per cent of those buildings over the last two years. A lot of what I observed forms some of the questions that I want to ask now.

We have had a bit of a conversation already about the issue of rent controls, and I appreciate that that's not technically something that's governed by your ministry. But since we have roughly a hundred million of spending, which is dedicated to trying to get around the fact that we don't have rent controls in place in large part, I think it's still relevant to this discussion. I would suggest that the lack of rent controls does actually have an impact on the market. In fact, I would say that it might even have a bigger impact than the predicted imposition of rent controls, what the predicted impact would be if we actually had rent controls, in that we're always hearing: oh, we can't put rent controls in because it skews the market and chaos ensues and the sky falls and everybody ends up living on the streets because rent controls do that to everybody. That's the argument that we get on the issue.

You know, in the last 15 years, of course, we haven't had any rent controls. It's been the free market driving the housing situation. We

also know that as a percentage overall we've had virtually no rental housing being built during that free market free-for-all where there were no rent controls. Conversely, now that we have a problem where demand has suddenly come into play in a huge way and everyone is looking for homes, what we see is that the lack of rent controls, I would say to you, is actually driving the issue of condo conversions. That's the huge issue that is impacting that particular area. I can't even begin to imagine, but I suspect that probably close to a thousand rental units were lost just in that little area that I'm talking about in the last year. I would say that part of the reason that that happened is because the real estate developers who convert these apartments and sell the individual condominiums sell them by telling people: "Well, don't worry. You can charge whatever rent you need to pay the quarter-million dollars that we're going to charge you for the 750 square foot, one-and-a-half-bedroom suite in the 50-year-old building."

I know from having knocked on doors that that's exactly what we're seeing. I've walked into buildings where people had lived and been paying \$500 a month rent, and then it was converted to a condominium, and suddenly they're paying \$1,100 or \$1,200 a month rent, and for that extra \$700 a month they're getting laminate flooring and a new paint job, and that's about it. The issue of condo conversion, I'm assuming, is also addressed under Service Alberta. But it again really, really factors into this whole question of both the rent supplement program and the affordable housing and the capital cost.

That's going to lead me to my first question, which is this. We've talked about the number of units that have been created, and the budget estimate document talks about there having been about 628 new affordable housing units created in 2006-2007, and there's a projection of roughly 2,200 units being created in 2008-2009, but I don't actually see the number for 2007-2008, sort of the current year. So I'd like to know what the actual number of new affordable housing units is that the ministry is taking some credit for from its funding contributions and how that relates to the number of units lost through the condo conversion process. If you could let me know what your ministry knows about the number of units being lost to conversion.

The final thing in this area. I'm wondering if you could give me the definition of what affordable housing is. I mean, I know in the rent supplement we're talking about 30 per cent of income, but I don't believe that's the same definition that's being used for the units created that you're talking about. Maybe it is and I'm wrong, but if you could clarify how you're defining affordable housing units.

Those are my three questions to start off.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for describing what it is that you've seen change for your constituency and how worrisome that was for you. I'm hoping that, you know, some of what we're discussing here will assist you in some way within your constituency, with the number of programs that we have available.

You'd asked the question about rent controls and about the condominium conversions. You're absolutely correct: it is with Service Alberta. I did address that earlier. I won't go into that any further because I know you were very interested, more so, about the number of units that were being developed. On page 173, the 628, the '08-09 was 2,200. As I'd mentioned earlier, the '07-08 was 2,100 units. That's not here, as you said, but it is 2,100 units. Then it goes to 2,200 and 2,200. I can tell you, though, as I'd mentioned earlier, that we are ahead of that. We're looking at, hopefully, 3,400 units this year.

Now, you'd asked for a clear definition of affordable housing. The definition is one where it is 30 per cent of their income that people pay for their housing, and it is hoped that there'll still be money left over for people to afford whatever else they determine to be the necessities for themselves. So you can see that that differs for all families, and I think that's why you're asking the question. You never do see it clearly defined in a way that you can put, you know, inside a box and say, "This is exactly what affordable housing is," which is why it's housing that I think a family can afford and still have disposal income, and that disposal income can pay, as I said, the remainder of their bills. We do look at it as being a 30 per cent level of income, the difference between that and the rent, and then we subsidize.

8:50

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you. Just to clarify, then, on that. Let's say that this year there have been 2,100 units created. Potentially they're privately owned; potentially they're publicly owned. In any event there's an agreement that the rent charged will never be more than 30 per cent of the income of the residents in each of those units? Is that how it works? Just to clarify because I'm not 100 per cent clear yet. Each of those 2,100 has a rent attached. It's not a case where we're subsequently going to be also supplementing certain tenants on top of it.

Then my other question was still just wondering whether you have the numbers on the units lost to condo conversions.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The answer to that last question is no. I don't have that number for the units from condo conversions as what you determine to be lost. I can't say that there's a definite number that I could tell you: here, it's exactly this.

Also, it's the municipalities that decide, when they make an application for their project, what they would determine to be affordable for what that local need was. For example, some can be 10 per cent below market rate, where they'll say that it will always be at 10 per cent below market rate. Some will be at 30 per cent below market. It just depends on the municipality. But when do we subsidize people? It's when they are paying more than 30 per cent of their income toward their rent and they can't afford what the necessities of life are for their families.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Notley: Thank you. That was, actually, my understanding, that the rent supplement program is managed around that 30 per cent number but that the affordable housing units are not necessarily the 30 per cent. I had understood that you had some that were 10 per cent below market. So you could actually have a case where we are funding something that's called an affordable housing unit that they say, "Well, we'll rent at 10 per cent below market," but we still might also then be subsequently subsidizing someone that lives inside that affordable housing unit as a result if market happens to be at 60 per cent of a given tenant's income.

Ms Blakeman: The individual and the unit.

Ms Notley: Right. So we're doing both there. That was just my question there.

I'm just hoping that maybe you could commit to looking into that

condo conversion number and giving me something in writing because, really, for a government that's been reluctant to put limits on condo conversions, we would think that it would be a good idea for there to be a number on how many are happening since that has such a profound impact on the number of affordable housing units that are available in any given place. So I'm hoping you can give me something back in writing even if, ultimately, a week from now it's: we just can't possibly give you that. I'd appreciate that. Well, actually, I'd appreciate the number more.

Anyway, going back to the rent supplement program the other question I have, then. Because it's this 30 per cent number, it's clear that there's no particular income cut-off. So you might in fact have someone that earns \$40,000 a year, and if, you know, suddenly their rent went up to \$2,000 a month – of course, there are many in my constituency that do rent for that much – they might be eligible then for the rent supplement, I'm assuming. If I'm wrong, please correct me.

Going along that line, my question to you is: do you have an estimate of how many more Albertans are eligible for the rent supplement program beyond those that are currently being paid? I would think that part of your increase is not simply due to the increased need, but it's also due to the increased awareness of people that they might be eligible for it. You know, a young professional who earns \$35,000 a year and has their rent increased to \$1,600, \$1,500 a month might well be eligible, but they wouldn't necessarily think to seek it out. I'm just wondering if you do have any estimates on what the potential growth is or what the potential eligibility is out there.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to go back to your initial comment about the number of people who require a subsidy when they're in an affordable housing unit that was developed through a nonprofit organization or the municipality. We find that's very seldom. We do assist people that are in deep, deep need like now with the Calgary Apartment Association, who are placing very chronically homeless people through the new start program, which means they've been on the street for five to eight years. Through the Calgary Housing Company we are placing people into homes. It's very seldom that people do require a subsidy when they are in an affordable housing unit.

Your question about the level of salary that an individual would earn prior to being assisted through a subsidy. I think it's in the city of Edmonton that you were inquiring about. In Edmonton for a bachelor suite it would be a \$27,000 base income, and then we would assist that individual. The one-bedroom unit is \$32,500, the two-bedroom unit is \$40,000, a three-bedroom is \$51,000, a four-bedroom is \$54,500, and a five-bedroom is almost \$60,000, and then we would assist with that accommodation if it was needed. You're absolutely right; it is different throughout the province. For example, one-bedroom unit, as I said, is \$32,500 here in Edmonton. In Fort McMurray it would be at \$65,000, and then we would assist people with a subsidy. I don't know if that helps.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Notley: Thank you. That does help a little bit. I am still interested in ultimately receiving from the minister or officials in her ministry any information you would have around estimates of eligibility because, you know, your \$58 million is based on basically the number of people who've applied for your rent supplement. I just have this sneaking suspicion that there are more than 8,500

Albertans who are paying more than 30 per cent of their income in rent right now, so I'm just curious about the potential liability, shall we say, that exists for the government in terms of subsidizing landlords and their rent increases. That's the question.

I want to just go to one quick area because I think I've got about two minutes left. I just want to quickly move to the area of transitional housing. I know there was some discussion about that already. There was discussion about the \$6 million and the pilot projects. There was also discussion about – I believe you'd indicated that certain beds within current emergency shelters are seen as transitional beds. My understanding was that the Affordable Housing Task Force really made some fairly substantive recommendations on transitional beds. They didn't see what was within the shelter system as being effective transitional units. They thought that there needed to be a roughly \$12 million investment alongside a significant capital expenditure. I believe they were looking at just under half a billion dollars per year over three years, not just for transitional, but it would have been included in there.

Anyway, I'm just curious. You've got a transitional housing initiative there at \$5 million. I'm just wondering: how many new beds have we seen in the last six months that would be described as transitional and would meet the criteria of providing the certainty and the stability to allow somebody who is hard to house, for lack of a better term, and to help them move off the mat on the church basement floor ultimately, a year and a half down the road, into a long-term, permanent home?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Back to your first question asking for the estimate of the number of individuals that would apply for the rent supplement program, I won't be getting back to you on that question because I find that hypothetical. We really don't know. There may be many people out there that could apply, but it's their choice whether they do or not for whatever reason they've determined that to be. I'd be misleading you if I said I'd have an answer like that for you, and it would waste my staff's time to be looking for something that I know we can't give you.

The other, though, about the transitional beds, especially for the new programs, I will put in writing to you.

9:00

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister and staff, for being available this evening. My first question is in relation to administrative expenses in policy and urban affairs. Please explain why it's costing \$2.3 million to run policy and urban affairs.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This is a new area for our ministry, hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose. Policy and urban affairs is going to take the lead role to work with urban municipalities. They'll identify and address the unique pressures that are being experienced due to high levels of growth and also liaise with other government departments to deal with these issues. This is in addition to operational costs that are related to the function of the business planning, the strategic planning, the policy development for the ministry at the corporate level. That determination of \$2.3 million was very carefully thought through by my deputy minister

and assistant deputy minister and chief financial officer. You know, we may have been right on the mark, but we also know that once we get to, you know, working with municipalities, it actually may be more than what is the line item here. Because it's a new program, it's one that we'll continue to evaluate and monitor very closely.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Chair. My second question is in relation to the Alberta Social Housing Corporation. Upon reviewing the 2006-2007 annual report, it appeared that the Alberta Social Housing Corporation had a large sum of cash accumulated, which is in some ways a very good thing. Minister, do you know what the cash balance was at the 2007-2008 year-end?

Mrs. Fritz: Mr. Chairman, the Alberta Social Housing Corporation does have a cash balance. To your question, hon. member, it was over \$180 million as of March 31, 2008.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you. Where is this cash coming from, Minister, and is this accumulating at the cost of shortchanging the mandated activities of the corporation?

I'll ask the next question at the same time. What are the plans for this excess cash?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As to where the cash is coming from, it's in the Alberta Social Housing Corporation's bank account, and it's due mainly to proceeds from land sales as well as recoveries received from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation for amortization costs based on original capital costs of each social housing project. That varied from 50 to 75 per cent. CMHC also reimburses the Alberta Social Housing Corporation for one-third of the operating deficit of our community housing and seniors' self-contained housing portfolio.

We are looking at the potential needs for these funds. They could address needs such as retiring the outstanding debt of the corporation. There may be an advantage to discharging these debts at an earlier date, Mr. Chairman, and suitable options like this will be prepared in consultation with officials from the Treasury Board and Finance and presented to Treasury Board for review and for approval.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Chair. My next question is in relation to the operating grant to the Alberta Social Housing Corporation. Can you please explain to me the purpose for which the department provides the corporation almost \$51 million for housing providers?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This funding is provided to management bodies, and that's to cover their operating deficits. Rental revenues are based on 30 per cent, as I said earlier, of the tenant's income. That does not cover the total operating expenses for the 25,000 owned and supported housing units, which provide safe affordable housing for over 48,000 Albertans. It is the department that makes up this difference.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhullar: That's it.

The Chair: All right.

Now I would like to recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. If it is agreeable to the minister, I'll try my best to do the back-and-forth thing.

What a difference a year makes. That was then; this is now. That will be the start of my focus. Last year during question period and debate the former minister of municipal affairs and housing accused me of grandstanding when I pointed out the plight of 292 residents who lived just behind my constituency office, and during the night-long debate the former Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* suggested that the difficulty that a number of my constituents were having was directly related to the fact that they had chosen me. I must point out that the individual who made that comment is no longer here, and the so-called one-time wonder has become a two-time wonder.

Last year every time an issue was raised, the figure of \$285 million was thrown out as the solution. I would like to know as my first question: how much of that \$285 million has resulted in the creation of affordable housing to date?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, \$211 million of the \$285 million was in capital. Was the \$285 million you asked about the Affordable Housing Task Force?

Mr. Chase: This was the figure that the hon. minister repeated every time we asked: what is the solution? It was a \$285 million solution.

The Chair: Hon. member, when you ask a question, please stand up.

Mr. Chase: To clarify, the \$285 million that I referred to was the amount the minister of municipal affairs and housing suggested was the end-all and be-all to solving the affordable housing problem, and I would like to know how much of that \$285 million has been spent and with what result. How many housing units have been built with that \$285 million over this past year?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There was \$285 million allocated, as you mentioned – and I think I'm understanding your question; this might help you – and \$211 million of that was for capital. Of that \$211 million for capital that went out to the community for the projects, \$143 million was in block funding, and \$68 million of that money was for requests for proposals. Once the communities at large received the funding, then they put in their application for housing in their communities, and that was for a total of 2,100 housing units. They are not all built at this time. They're all in different stages of construction, but they are being built throughout the province. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, I'm anticipating that it will be 3,400 units.

The Chair: The hon. member.

9:10

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Just so that I completely understand, in the past year since the announcement of the \$285 million, approximately

2,000 affordable houses will have been built – should we say by this fall or this winter? – using part of that funding. I'll look forward to the clarification.

The homeless and eviction prevention fund was brought forward partially due to the number of people who could no longer afford the sky's the limit rent increases that unscrupulous landlords were demanding of them. The initial idea was that that fund, in my mind, was supposed to be a temporary fund. It started out somewhere around \$9 million, and it rapidly became \$14 million. To date how much has been spent on that homeless and eviction prevention fund?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As you know, hon. member, this program is being delivered through the Ministry of Employment and Immigration, but I'll answer it for you as best I can.

Through our ministry we've allocated and transferred to that ministry \$43 million for '07-08. The homeless and eviction prevention fund has had approximately 60,000 to 65,000 transactions, and the number of transactions has had excellent results for people. In fact, when I met on Thursday with Tim Richter, who is the new president and CEO for the Calgary Homeless Foundation, I asked him: which of all our programs would you like to see remain in place and enhanced in any way if need be? He said the one that they are finding is helping the most with an immediacy was this emergency fund. He said: whatever you do, try to protect that program.

Yes, it has grown. They had anticipated \$7 million; it is \$43 million in '07-08. But it is definitely working for people, and the foundations out there are seeing that. Back to the question from Calgary-Currie, that's why I'm anticipating that over the next year or two we'll see our shelter beds – he asked if they would be increasing – either at status quo or even lessened, because of funds like this one and the rent supplement program.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. I have the same concern that I had a year ago with regard to the homeless and eviction prevention fund. While I appreciate the mercy, so to speak, in terms of keeping people with a roof over their head, the group that benefits the most are the landlords because the money basically goes right through the fingers of those for whom it is designed to help and into the landlords' pockets.

Last year at this time after the Affordable Housing Task Force reported, the government rejected over half of its findings, and the two most significant that potentially could have had a large impact and created stability were the rent subsidy program and the condo conversion program. Now, landlords quickly realized that the way around the condo conversion program was simply to jack up the rents, and then you don't have to announce a condo conversion. You basically drive the people out, and then there's nobody to send your notices to.

With regard to rents the government in its wisdom felt that the market would have a lowering effect on rents in general. While there has been an improved amount of vacancy – for example, in Calgary it went from about .5 at this time last year to I believe the figure is about 2.5 per cent – can the minister give me any backup or proof that there has been a perceived reduction in rents over this past year's period? Has the market kicked in and done what the government hoped it would do?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To answer that last question first, we haven't seen a reduction in the number of people renting. We've seen a reduction in the increases, though, for people that are renting. The homeless and eviction prevention fund is not in place to simply put money, as you said, in the pockets of landlords. In fact, we have many, many, good landlords out there. When you have a thousand people that are renting their apartment units through the new start program to people that are homeless or chronically homeless, I just can't say enough about, you know, the goodness of landlords to do that. So I just disagree with you about that statement.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I wouldn't suggest, by any means, that all landlords are unscrupulous. There are probably some wonderful landlords who, as you point out, have a duplex or have a basement suite or a 12-unit apartment building, and some of those have stepped up to help individuals from the Inn from the Cold program. So there are benefactors, supportive individuals out there.

But in the case of the larger complexes landlords have gotten very creative because the government has said: well, you can only have one increase per year, but there's no limit to the size of that increase. The creativity has shown up in the form of, "We'll now pull the cable out of your rent, and we'll charge you additional fees for cable" or "Utilities which were once covered in your rent are now removed from that rent, and you will pay the increase in utilities." Is this an acceptable way for a landlord to have more than a single increase in a year, or is this not permitted?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As I'd mentioned earlier to previous questions, there is the Service Alberta ministry, that has the tenant protection act in place to protect people and works with people in what you brought forward about the increases.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. Sometimes when the responsibility is spread over so many different ministries, the individuals who need the help have difficulty accessing the information. Of course, that's one of the jobs as a constituency office: we provide that for individuals. But there doesn't seem to be one-place shopping information to assist individuals.

I asked if you'd noticed any kind of a hopeful, perceivable sign that the trend for rents was downward. For example, I know that in some of the less affordable houses in the middle range to the higher range there have been some drops in the price of housing, but I haven't witnessed within my Calgary situation a significant or even a partial decrease in rents. Have you seen otherwise?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I can only go back to what I'd mentioned earlier as well. The Calgary Apartment Association when they came forward said that the rental increases that they anticipated this year were between 5 and 8 per cent. You're absolutely right: they did indicate that for the homes that are at the higher end of the market that are renting, some of those rents have come down considerably.

Mr. Chase: The problem is that for the majority of individuals who

are living around the poverty line, who are most in need of help, housing is still prohibitive for them due to cost.

One of the organizations that can leverage funds to a terrific extent, can turn basically a dollar into five, is Habitat for Humanity. What percentage of this year's 2008 budget has been set aside to support the Habitat for Humanity initiative?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

9:20

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As you know, we've had in the budget \$309 million allocated for capital dollars, and we are now working out through the ministry, through our deputy minister and our chief financial officer and staff, as to what will be shown to the community as to how they can apply for, you know, funding: in which way, through which agreements, and whatnot.

Habitat for Humanity is an excellent organization. I met with the president, Alfred Nikolai, here just last week, and he indicated to me a number of projects that he is working on with various municipalities, even including First Nations and Métis people, for the provision of affordable housing. Mr. Nikolai has applied for funding through the department in the past and received funding through the RFP process, and I anticipate that he will be applying for funding for the number of projects that he brought forward.

I met with a colleague of mine this afternoon from Drayton Valley who indicated to me that they had in their community Humans Helping Humans, which is very similar to Habitat for Humanity. They, too, will apply through an RFP to develop what they see as needs in their community. There are a number of organizations that are very similar to Habitat for Humanity throughout the province that have an opportunity to apply based on the capital dollars that were allocated in this budget.

Mr. Chase: Can you please refresh my memory? These various organizations that can leverage the funding: what is the pot that they can apply for?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As I indicated earlier, we haven't made the final decision on the allocation of the funds, but that is being worked through now with the department officials. That, I hope, you'll be seeing coming forward here within the next couple of weeks.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Another organization that works hand in hand with Habitat for Humanity, at least in the city of Calgary, is the Calgary Land Trust. Both Habitat for Humanity and the Calgary Land Trust have indicated that the biggest cost for these housing projects is the cost of land. What amount of land has the government freed up or subsidized so that affordable housing developments such as Habitat for Humanity or through the Calgary Land Trust have become available as a result of this year's budget or this year's programming?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. For members here tonight the Calgary Land Trust is, as you know, part of the Calgary Homeless Foundation. You're absolutely right: we are freeing up provincial land for affordable housing. That's through allowing

vacant school sites to be used for housing and not just for housing but for services like libraries and fire halls. We did have in place, which you would be familiar with, hon. member, the land disbursement policy framework for affordable housing. That is helping municipalities and not-for-profit groups. It's helping them to acquire Crown land for affordable housing for a nominal sum, which in some cases is a dollar. We're working with school boards to identify what surplus school lands can be used for affordable housing and facilities like the public libraries, as I said, daycares, and fire halls. But only the portion that was originally intended for the school building and its parking lot can be developed, which thereby preserves existing parks and green spaces. I'm hoping that helps you with what you're looking for with the Calgary Land Trust.

Mr. Chase: My ears just absolutely rang when you mentioned the dollar deals because this is something I pushed for frequently last year. Can you give me an example of dollar deals that have occurred this year for any of the communities, urban or rural, who have benefited from the largesse or support of the province?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you. That's an interesting question because we do do quite a few throughout the province, and I'm thinking: what will come to mind for me immediately? What really does come to mind for me is Fort McMurray because we know how important it is to develop residential land in Fort McMurray. In the last two years we released 670 acres of public land, and that developed more than 5,300 residential units, and that included 600 affordable housing units. Consultations right now are ongoing with related land sale issues in the area of Fort McMurray.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. My next question has to do with affordable student housing. In this past year I've been at a number of . . . [Mr. Chase's speaking time expired]

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will pick up where the Member for Calgary-Varsity left off and ask about affordable student housing. Although I think he is perhaps more directly familiar with the issue given that the University of Calgary, which is in his constituency and which he pays great deal of attention to, has I think one of the most critical shortages of affordable housing for students in the province, it is an issue on a number of college and university campuses. We did, as I recall, discuss that issue briefly in the advanced education estimates, but I'd like to get some feedback from the Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs on the issue of affordable student housing: what, if anything, related to that falls under the purview of her ministry, the extent to which she's working co-operatively with the minister and the ministry of advanced education on this issue, and what specific plans are in the works for the provision of more affordable student housing. This is, I think, on-campus student residences – it's primarily that – but of course the spinoff effect of that is that if you build more on-campus residences for students, you also often have the spinoff effect, much like with the provision of affordable housing in general, causing housing for students that's off campus to become more within the realm of affordability for a struggling student.

I'm going to get either the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity or the hon. minister of advanced education, if I'm wrong in my figures,

to correct me on this, but we have with the University of Calgary provision of student housing for only I believe it's 9 per cent of the student population.

Mr. Horner: It's going to about 12.

Mr. Taylor: Going to about 12 per cent according to the minister of advanced education. So 9 to 12 per cent. I think 20 per cent is more of a target figure for many postsecondary institutions. [interjection] Would the minister of advanced education like to join the debate?

Mr. Horner: Just trying to help you out, sir.

Mr. Taylor: Well, then, do speak up. Remember that with 30 years in the media, you know, I have a very hard time hearing anything more than five feet away from me because I wore my headphones too loud for too many years.

Anyway, back to the matter at hand, affordable student housing. We're right now at about 9 per cent and going to 12 per cent at the University of Calgary. That's on the low side. Specifically, what plans are in the works to address that?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I know that this is very important to the Member for Calgary-Currie and the Member for Calgary-Varsity and many of my colleagues in Calgary caucus and overall here. We had been at a students' union housing forum for affordable housing about eight months ago, I think, together with Alderman Hodges and others that the students' union had hosted. At that time I met privately with the students' union president, Julie Bogle, as well as the vice-president, Mike Selnes, and discussed with them the need for a study that they had brought forward which would include housing that they're looking for along the very busy traffic with the LRT and just housing overall, whether it's in our 11,000 units or apartments or whatever and housing on campus. I did commit at the time to provide \$50,000 toward that study. That was allocated about two months ago, and the students' union in Calgary is working along with the study, and we'll look forward to what the results of that are.

9:30

I met recently, about a week ago, with the students' union here in Edmonton as well, who brought forward their thoughts on how we could assist them with their housing needs, and I met with our minister of advanced education immediately following. We've met and also have been reviewing how we can assist. We will be continuing our meetings with the students' union.

I have to say one thing, hon. member, that I'm actually quite proud of. The students' union in Calgary invited me to what they call their colour night, which is where they hand over the reins to the incoming president. There are approximately 100 to 200 people that attend, including the administration at the university. I was very honoured to have been presented with the president's award for the commitment that I've made to affordable housing with the students' union. I plan to continue that good work with them. It's an interest I have, very much like you do.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wonder if we can switch gears somewhat now and talk a little bit about Monarch Place, which was an affordable housing project in Red Deer and which was the

subject of part of the report of the Auditor General in April 2008. He investigated after receiving a complaint about the Innovative Housing Society of Canada selling Monarch Place, an affordable housing project in Red Deer. The society, of course, had received grant funding from the province of Alberta to construct the project, and the continued availability of affordable housing in the project was uncertain at the time of the complaint.

Now, as I recall and just looking through here very quickly, the Auditor General found no evidence that the society operated outside the terms and the conditions of the affordable housing grant. The society experienced financial difficulties upon opening Monarch Place, worked to try to find a solution to that. The board – the Monarch housing board, that is – realized that it needed a partner to operate and manage the proposed facility and turned the task of developing and managing Monarch Place over to the society in the spring of 2003. So the capital dollars were there to construct Monarch Place, but it seemed that the operating dollars never followed from this government or any other place. While the Auditor General found no evidence that the society operated outside the terms and conditions of the affordable housing grant, the Auditor General also found that the society was pretty much forced to sell the property through a real estate agent to a third party not affiliated with the society because of the financial difficulties that it found upon opening Monarch Place.

I'm asking some questions around this in part because anything having to do with the new owners of the building is beyond, you know, really, the scope of the Auditor General's responsibilities. It's difficult, and it was very difficult for the people of Red Deer, as the minister knows, to see this rather innovative affordable housing initiative undertaken and then not succeed. I'm wondering what the minister can tell me in terms of what has changed now in her department that would prevent this sort of thing from happening again. It's a question not so much of making sure that when we grant money to someone to either construct or operate affordable housing, if they end up selling the project off, we get the money back. Of course, we want that, too, but far more important than that is that we not have to ask for the taxpayers' money back in the first place because we make sure that projects and initiatives like this continue to be a going concern.

What steps has the minister taken to make sure that henceforth and hopefully forevermore, especially in the case of smaller centres like Red Deer or Grande Prairie or Fort McMurray or any of the rest of them, when we go down this road of creating and providing affordable housing, which is in limited supply to begin with, especially where special needs may be involved and so on and so forth, we make sure that the operating dollars follow the capital dollars so that it is a going concern?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As you know, with Monarch Place we had provided a \$1.3 million grant to develop 26 units of affordable housing in Red Deer. The Auditor General did receive a public complaint because Monarch Place had sold the property, and along with the findings that this member mentioned, that the Auditor, from what I recall from the report, had placed in the conclusion of the report, the Auditor also had said, though, that the program goals were met, the contract was adequately monitored, the public funds were protected.

On the question in terms of operating costs. As you know, we are a department that provides a grant program such as this one that was given to Monarch Place for capital dollars to build the affordable housing units, and that is, in turn, so that the operator has less

operating costs. That's, of course, through, for example, not having a mortgage payment to make. You know, there are a number of ways that that can help reduce their operating costs.

Your question as to whether that will change the policy of the department: will we now begin to provide our capital grant to municipalities and organizations and people applying for capital dollars, and adjacent to that will we offer an operating grant? The answer is no. We will continue to operate the capital program in the way that we do now. We do not provide operating dollars. This is very, very unusual – and you know that, as well – that this happened with an organization, and I regret that that's happened with Monarch Place. It's unfortunate, but it's extremely rare, what did happen here. That doesn't call to me for any change in the way in which we deliver our capital program. Will it assist us in the future to be even more stringent with how we assist people applying for capital dollars to ensure that they have the operating costs after the project is built? Definitely. It will assist us, you know, in a continuous way with how we deliver the program.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you. I'm glad to hear that there will be more stringent examination of whether the proponent of a project is capable of making sure that operationally the project continues to carry on successfully before capital dollars are given out. It's long been a contention of mine that, you know, you not only don't solve the problem; sometimes you create a worse problem than the one that you set out to solve if all you do is commit capital dollars, whether it's to affordable housing, new hospital construction, whatever it is, and you don't follow it up with the operating dollars to make the thing a full-fledged reality.

Now, as the minister was saying, if this is kind of a one-off, I guess, if this is an unusual circumstance or set of circumstances in the case of Monarch Place, I can understand, and I won't go after the minister the way I might go after the health minister for actually providing operating dollars to open the beds that his predecessor's capital commitments have now caused to be built. Nevertheless, I'm interested in hearing from the minister, even if this is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of arrangement, whether there's a need or whether, in fact, you may already have a place in your budget to provide for the occasional bailout of a situation like this.

9:40

I know that we don't want to get into the habit of throwing good money after bad, but by the same token, when you look at programs like the rent supplement program at \$58 million and the homeless and eviction prevention fund at \$44 million and the fact that they do in effect subsidize landlords, one would think that you could scare up a few dollars around the ministry somewhere, you know, in a darkened corner of a closet on the third floor someplace or something like that, to effect a bailout in a situation like this so that people in need of special-needs affordable housing don't end up out on the street.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. At the time when Monarch Place had been funded for those 26 units, we also delivered throughout the province, from my recollection, about 5,400 units, so you can see that 26 units are very small compared to the 5,400 units. That doesn't say to me that we would create a fund within this department, which we do not have, a fund to provide operating dollars for people that have received capital dollars for their project to provide

affordable units for people and then find that they need operating dollars due to whatever circumstances have come their way. That's just not a policy within our department, and it's not one that I'll be creating.

Mr. Taylor: I'll take that as no, then.

On page 258 again, line item 2.2.4, the off-reserve aboriginal housing program, \$16,142,000. The aboriginal population is the fastest growing segment of this province's population and, one might argue, one of the groups most overrepresented among the homeless population. I guess the question that I have is: is that \$16 million not, in fact, one year's worth of a three-year program of federal funding? Correct me if I'm wrong, but I can't see anywhere that the Alberta government has put matching dollars into this. This looks like 100 per cent federal money to me. Am I wrong about that? If I'm not wrong about that, why has your ministry not matched this federal incentive?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The off-reserve aboriginal housing program – you're correct – is a \$16 million program that was through the federal government. It was to assist aboriginal people living off reserve with the development of new housing units and also to provide repairs to existing housing stock in major urban centres and most of our remote northern communities.

This is the last year of that funding, as you had indicated, and we are administering that funding as a province. With the continued funding of this program, where it is now, with the federal government discontinuing the program, we know the importance of the program. I have met with the federal minister in that regard. That was at a federal-provincial-territorial meeting in April. We would like to see this program continue, as it is being finished, because we know that since the commencement of the program two years ago the funding has been provided to develop 272 new housing units and – this part is really important – also 204 home-ownership units.

I had an opportunity to meet with the Bigstone Cree nation about two weeks ago here in the Legislature. That is a program that we would definitely want to see continue for aboriginal people. As well, it's covering repairs to 160 existing housing units. Now, in '08-09 we're expecting this program to have at least 250 households that will be assisted as well. I would like to see it be an ongoing program. I'm hoping that you will lobby the federal minister as well to say that this is a good program and should be continued.

Your question about it being a matching program. No, it wasn't a matched program per se. What we did with our dollars through the Canada-Alberta affordable housing program was a matching program that was in place. This was completely separate. This was a different program than that. But in hand when the federal government has \$16 million in place, we have, as you know that we mentioned through the budget here even this year, \$309 million in place for capital projects.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. What is the Alberta government doing about the supply and demand shortage of rental accommodations in the province?

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, hon. member. We are providing, as I was mentioning earlier, \$309 million in capital funding in this fiscal year that we're discussing here. It's expected that this funding along with

the \$877 million in capital expenditure in 2009-10 to 2011-12 will lead to the development, as I said earlier, of 11,000 additional affordable housing units by 2012. The majority of those will be new rental accommodation.

Mrs. Leskiw: Do you know how many of them are, let's say, in northeastern Alberta, like in Bonnyville-Cold Lake, Fort McMurray, the areas that have a lot of the oil development? How many affordable units are going to be built in that area?

Mrs. Fritz: I can't say to you exactly what that would be. I know that we've been discussing together, you and I, hon. member, the number of units that will be built. We discussed more recently about the municipality receiving funding and whether they could use it for, you know, land acquisition or for administrative costs and what the amount of funding is that they can allocate towards their units. They haven't put forward their proposal yet, but 70 per cent of their funding can be used toward affordable housing units. Overall your constituency is working very hard in Bonnyville-Cold Lake for affordable housing units. They're also being creative and innovative in the way that they have assessed the needs of their community. What they can achieve to be successful in the community overall has been quite well done.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you. When can we expect to see the actual housing units as a result of this funding?

Mrs. Fritz: The development process from start to finish is currently up to two years for new units, which is understandable. Depending on the options that are chosen by the municipality to address its needs, the time frame for getting units on the ground can vary from immediate for rent supplements to the time it takes to develop the new housing. As well, some funding has provided new rent supplement units and purchased existing buildings, and these units are helping low-income families today.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you.

The Chair: I now recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. My colleague from Calgary-Currie touched on the plight of urban First Nations. We know that within the next two years Edmonton is going to outstrip, outpace Winnipeg as having the highest population of First Nations. The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie indicated that to date the only funding that has been put into support for First Nations has been from the federal government. I would ask the minister to qualify why the province hasn't recognized the rapid population growth of First Nations and the First Nations' need for housing.

9:50

Mrs. Fritz: You know, Mr. Chairman, every now and then something comes along where it gives you a sobering second thought when you discuss and discuss, you know, when your door is always open to people to ask questions and to learn about programs that are in place. I'm very surprised that you would think we would shut First Nations out of our affordable housing program here in government. First Nations people qualify for all programs that we have in place, especially our capital grant program. We were discussing the federal commitment of \$16 million for off-reserve housing. We've made a commitment of \$309 million for capital funding this year alone, and First Nations very much qualify.

The areas that you asked what has been built with the off-reserve aboriginal housing. In Calgary the Siksika Family Services Corporation had \$4.5 million to purchase and/or renovate existing rental units. East Prairie Métis settlement had \$607,250 for the purchase of rental units. The Elizabeth Métis settlement had \$200,000 for the downpayment of up to \$20,000 on new home purchases, which, as I was saying, is a very good program for First Nations to assist with the home ownership program. I'll just say one more, that in Stand Off, Mr. Chairman, the Blood tribe administration through the Blood Tribe Housing Authority had \$1.1 million, which was a downpayment of up to \$20,000 on new home purchases. This is a program that has been provided with the off-reserve aboriginal housing, which I think your question had related to as well. So you can see that with these dollars the First Nations are being very proactive and responsible in how they can create success for their people who are in very dire need to be housed.

We also know, you know, for our aboriginal community that many people are leaving our reserves because of the poverty and the violence and all of the concerns that they have on the reserves. They very much qualify for these very good programs that we have in place here through the ministry with the capital dollars. I hope that has truly clarified that for you tonight, that they are very much a part of what we do.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I wouldn't want my comments to be construed as suggesting that I'm looking for urban ghettos populated by First Nations, but there are a number of First Nations advocacy groups – I'm talking urban groups – and I'd be interested in knowing what special projects and collaborative efforts you've undertaken with First Nations off-reserve groups in terms of supporting housing.

You again spoke with the Member for Calgary-Currie about the Housing First program. I'd be interested to know – and I'm sorry if you're repeating yourself – how many individuals have been housed in the Housing First program to date. What is the timeline for evaluating the success of the program? The idea being that the hardest to house quite often cost the system over a hundred thousand dollars, where the Housing First model can provide security not only for the individuals housed but for their landlords for approximately a third of the value, what factors would you take into consideration to consider this sort of first 50 pilot project a success? Again, how many individuals at this point are housed and the speed of the program in getting that first 50 successfully housed?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll make the commitment to get back to you on the number of people that are being housed there currently as we speak. I have pages of the numbers of people here, so I can add them up for you and give you that at a later date. When you do receive that, that was \$8 million that we had allocated for this number of people, but it's fairly significant, and I'll get that back to you.

Also, when you asked about the housing units for First Nations people that we've provided, they do include units through Mount Royal College in Calgary, the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Portage College in Lac La Biche, in Alberta's northeast, and a number of others, but I will get back to you the number of individuals involved.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I appreciate your getting back to me.

I would like to know what progress has been made in improving the housing availability and the living conditions for temporary foreign workers or, a similar circumstance, the six-plus Fort

McMurray workers forced to share a basement suite or a two-bedroom apartment at an extreme rent rate. Has your department offered any sort of protection for temporary foreign workers with regard to housing?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We do not have a program that has been specially designed for temporary foreign workers. I think that the employer does have a responsibility when they bring a temporary foreign worker here to Alberta, which we more than welcome and, you know, need employees that are through that program. But our ministry does not provide a special program for temporary foreign workers.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. As I say, I realize there are so many interconnected ministries that are dealing with people who find themselves in kind of tragic circumstances trying to do the best they can.

Now, one of the groups that is the most difficult, hardest to house, is people with disabilities. We've had sad stories come out of Edmonton; one, I believe, in Edmonton-Centre where a husband suffered an affliction which would prevent him from physically lifting his wife. His wife basically was a prisoner on the third floor of their housing unit, and for months and months and months she remained that prisoner without the husband being able to secure appropriate accommodation for her on a street-level bungalow sort of circumstance. There was also a very sad circumstance of an individual suffering from mental illness who was trapped in a basement suite and was unable to be rescued.

I'm just wondering, given how hard it is to house, what percentage of your affordable housing is specifically targeted at individuals with disabilities, whether physically handicapped or suffering from a mental illness of some sort, in which they would therefore require either special structures in the house, ramps et cetera, or a care worker to assist them.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is a priority for our government to meet Albertans' needs for affordable and appropriate housing, which is what you're discussing, for housing that is barrier free. Special-needs clients include people with physical disabilities and others. Under our special-needs housing program we provided \$4.7 million last year to municipal public and private nonprofit groups that provided housing to more than 1,600 special-needs households.

What you've described that related to the health concerns for this individual's spouse: there are houses, you know; there is availability through programs for adaptation for housing but also through the Ministry of Seniors and Community Supports. Through AADL there's equipment that can assist individuals for what you have been discussing.

Now, our community housing program provides 10,500 affordable housing units across the province that also can provide options to those with special needs. Some of those units are wheelchair accessible. We have the new capital funding program. It encourages municipalities to create special-needs housing as part of their housing plans. Also, special-needs people can apply for rent supplement programs, the homeless and eviction prevention fund, all the programs that we have in place. Municipalities are very, very

aware of the need for housing for people with special needs, and many of their projects that are coming forward are showing innovative ways in which they can assist people in the community with barrier-free homes.

10:00

Mr. Chase: Thank you. On page 258 of estimates, line 2.4.2, the 2008-09 estimate of \$5.1 million for special-needs housing is down from last year's forecast of \$5.3 million. What is the reason for this decrease in funding for the most vulnerable people in society? Did you overestimate the need, or is there some other, practical reason?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. You're looking for an explanation for that variance with the \$216,000 decrease?

Mr. Chase: Line 2.4.2 from the 2008-09 estimates indicated \$5.1 million would be needed for this year.

The Chair: Hon. member, please rise to speak to clarify the point.

Mr. Chase: I realize that. Sorry. I'm trying to find that polite spot not to interfere with the minister.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Chase: To qualify the question. According to – and I'll repeat the line – page 258, line 2.4.2, the 2008-09 estimate of \$5.1 million is down from last year's forecast of a need of \$5.3 million, and I'm just wondering why the estimate or the reality is lower than what was forecast.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The reason for that decrease – it is 4.1 per cent – is because there was a maintenance issue that had a one-time expense. We'd forecasted for that. The funding is no longer required because it was a one-time maintenance expense.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. Most of these programs offered for special-needs housing are subsidized by the federal government. Given that there are substantial federal dollars involved, couldn't more be done provincially to enhance the quality of life for residents of these facilities, those with physical or mental handicaps, victims of family violence?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We are working hard to, you know, be certain that we are offering the best programs that we can, especially through our capital program for housing, and that would certainly include the people that the member had asked about.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Just from a comparative point of view, \$5.1 million seems like small change compared to horse racing, which received a large subsidy from this government. Line 3.0.8 on page 125 of the estimates of Culture and Community Spirit allocates \$48 million to the horse racing and breeding renewal program. I know

this isn't your ministry, Minister, but by comparison vulnerable individuals are receiving a small percentage of what horse racing is receiving. How can we justify the difference between looking after animals and looking after vulnerable people?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think it's important that the member know that the units supported under this program that we're discussing for special-needs housing assisted over 2,400 Albertans with special needs and provided households with safe and affordable housing in over 1,600 units. That's fairly significant. We continue to evaluate the program, and as people from our communities bring forward what they determine to be the best ways in which to assist the community overall, we try to accommodate that. I can tell you, hon. member, that staff work very hard to make certain that we're working in the best way possible to assist our tenants, especially our tenants that have special needs, when it relates to our housing initiatives.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. In the business plan on page 174 goal 3 is to identify and address growth pressures faced by urban municipalities. Can the minister tell us what specifically she is doing to achieve this goal?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We are developing the performance measure. It's to reflect the Albertans accessing the transitional housing created through block funding and request for proposal funding as part of the affordable housing initiative. But when we look at goal 3, the mandated responsibility here with the performance measure is new. We are developing that performance measure over the next year, and that's to reflect the strategies that we've identified here overall.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I apologize for hopping back and forth. Another question I had with regard to the hard to house, the vulnerable individuals with disabilities: do you have a sense, does your department have a number of people who are on the waiting list for housing that can accommodate special needs?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. No, we don't have a waiting list. I haven't been asked to create one by the community at all in regards to special needs and haven't identified this as being needed or necessary.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Does the ministry have a form of outreach, or do they simply contact existing agencies working with physically disabled or mentally disabled individuals? I'm just wondering how we get the message out about the availability of support and housing for these most vulnerable individuals.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, yes, Mr. Chairman, we do. Agencies keep a very close eye on us. When I said that there are 2,400 Albertans that have been helped – and that's been through 1,600 units – I can tell you

that agencies know how to contact us. They know about our business plan. They're very aware. They would certainly let us know if they wished that we would create a special list for people with special needs, but I've not had that request, and I won't be creating one at this time.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I would really like to know the percentages of individuals who are waiting to be housed and the success at accommodating those individuals.

Back to municipalities and growth pressures. Can the minister tell us which municipality she has met with to identify their unique pressures due to the high level of growth and what the outcome of those meetings was? I think you referenced Fort McMurray, for example. Can you give us examples of other municipalities like, for example, Grande Prairie that are experiencing some of the same problems as Edmonton and Calgary in terms of affordable housing? They're probably worse off, but it's a smaller population scrambling for a limited amount of housing.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I've met with a number of municipalities throughout the province relative to affordable housing. The areas that you may be interested in are the larger municipalities because those are what you mentioned. There are seven: Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray, Red Deer, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Calgary, and Edmonton. In fact, I invited the authorities to choose one person to be on the secretariat, which they have done, and they are contributing in that way.

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

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Just before I proceed with a few questions, I want to thank the minister and her staff for being here this late. It is a little bit past my bedtime.

The first question I wanted to talk to you about is that I've reviewed the estimates in the minister's department, and I notice that there are substantial provisions for debt reduction and debt servicing costs. I wonder if I could get some details on that. What debt instruments are we dealing with, and specifically what are the interest rates and amounts associated with the indenture?

10:10

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The Alberta Social Housing Corporation has outstanding debentures totalling approximately \$76 million as of March 31, 2008, with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and a note payable of \$224 million to Alberta Finance. These long-term debts were a source of funding for the construction and purchase of the existing 27,000 social housing units that are owned by the corporation. Those units provide 60,000 Albertans with safe, affordable housing.

Now, Mr. Chairman, under the terms of the debt agreements the corporation makes an annual principal and interest payment to the CMHC and semiannual principal and interest payments to Alberta Finance.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Denis: Thank you again, Mr. Chair. Another question is

dealing with the statement of operations for the Alberta Social Housing Corporation. Could you kindly explain about the \$19 million expense for nominal sum disposals? What does that involve?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This is a very interesting, important part of the good work that we do in working with municipalities. Through nominal sum disposals of land and social housing units no longer required, the Alberta Social Housing Corporation facilitates the construction of additional affordable housing units throughout the province. These units and land are transferred to management organizations for a nominal sum, and then they use this asset to build more suitable affordable housing units for low- to moderate-income Albertans. Now, the nominal sum provision reflects the difference between the market value of the property and the nominal sum sale price, and they're recorded as an expense.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Denis: Thank you again, Mr. Chair. Finally, in this coming year, 2008-2009, I see an estimation of over \$100 million in revenues to be received from the government of Canada. Can you explain why the government of Alberta is receiving this amount of funding from the government of Canada? Typically, the money goes the other way.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. These revenues are a result of a number of cost-shared agreements in place between the provincial and the federal government on a number of our housing programs. Revenues received from the federal government may include capital grants, amortization costs on provincially owned social housing projects based on original capital costs, and recoveries on operating deficits and rental subsidies. The estimated revenues for each program are: for the rent supplement program, \$8.2 million; the affordable housing program, \$10.2 million; our off-reserve aboriginal housing program, \$16.1 million; our special-needs program, \$3 million; and our community housing and seniors' self-contained units, \$62.9 million.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Taylor: Boy, oh boy. I'm up again. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. You may remember earlier, Minister, that I said I thought I might get around, if there was time, to some questions about why certain things that certainly seem to be properly of interest to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs live in other parts of the government, so I've got a couple of questions about that.

The homeless and eviction prevention fund. I believe that the funding for this program is through your ministry, but the administration of the program is through Employment and Immigration, and I've never understood why that's so. It would seem to me that the homeless and eviction prevention fund not only should be funded by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs but should be administered by the ministry as well. It's the logical place for it. Why isn't it in your ministry and what, if anything, are you doing, can you do to try and shift it over so that it lives fully under the umbrella of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs?

That brings up the question around a couple of things that have been discussed tonight about rent caps, rent controls, condo conversions: tenant consumer protection, if we can call it that generally, which lives under Service Alberta. Again, it seems to me to be clearly a housing issue. Why not move it under the umbrella of Housing and Urban Affairs? Now, I'm just a guy on the opposition side of the House, but it would seem to me that if you can create a ministry virtually overnight, you should be able to in relatively short order move all the component pieces that should be in that new ministry into said ministry and out of the ministries that they live in now. Your thoughts on that, Minister, if you would, please.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The homeless and eviction prevention fund, when it was put in place, was a program that had an immediacy to it, was to be delivered immediately. The appropriate ministry was Employment and Immigration. That's because they have a presence throughout the province. That presence means that they work very closely with people in need, and many of the programs that they administer assist individuals and families in a way that is responsible, but it's also deliverable. They have their offices located in municipalities. It's far more efficient. It's more accessible for people. You know that vulnerable people often do not have transportation. They do need to use LRTs or the bus lines or whatever, but you do need the offices easily located within the communities and within the municipalities.

Your question about Service Alberta and rent control – I think it was about the rent control that you asked for Service Alberta overall and various others. They have a broader consumer protection, and with that broader protection that they have, it's just a better fit within their program regarding rent controls. When it comes to that, you need to have consistency with those responsibilities, and that's what Service Alberta does. That's very much within their mandate as far as that area that you've mentioned.

Mr. Taylor: Well, I buy all that except for a couple of things. Number one, all other things having to do with housing used to live in the ministry of municipal affairs and housing. Back when this minister was the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports, they lived in that department. So, I mean, things can be moved around. That's pretty clear. At some point along the line here the decision was made that housing is enough of an issue in the province of Alberta that it deserves its own ministry. Many component parts having to do with housing were moved into the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. Correct me if I'm wrong – again, I could be wrong; I'm not an expert – but it seems to me that the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs administers the rent supplement program. Now, if you can do that, why couldn't you do the homeless and eviction prevention fund?

If we want to rewind the tape back to when the homeless and eviction prevention fund first started, I think there might be some merit to the minister's argument that Employment and Immigration was all over the province and best suited to immediately start dealing with that program, leaving aside that in the first go-round the homeless and eviction prevention fund internal audit from September 24, 2007, revealed some major flaws in the program. We've talked about that in the House before, so I don't necessarily need to go into excruciating detail about that again although if we have enough time left, I might have a question or two about that. But really, I mean, we're getting on here now. Is it not about time that the ministry of housing took over the administration of the homeless and eviction prevention fund? It clearly falls within your mandate.

Clearly you can deliver the rent supplements. Why can't you deliver the homeless and eviction prevention fund cheques?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

10:20

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The Employment and Immigration ministry has 56 offices throughout the province, and it really is far more efficient and more effective for them to deliver the program. That program focuses on people, as you know, that are in immediate need, and then it's delivered in a way, as I said, that is best for the client. So the funding is not being spent on developing a whole new administrative process. That money is actually going directly to the people that we know it would assist the most.

Mr. Taylor: But if that's so, how is it that your department is set up to deliver the rent supplements? I mean, that's a pretty urgent issue, too – is it not? – for the people who need them.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The rent supplement program is administered through management bodies, and they are arm's length from government. They're administered through authorities like the Calgary Housing Company, the Edmonton Housing Trust, you know, the authorities and the foundations that are throughout the province. So the rent supplement program is actually completely different than what we're discussing here in the administration of this program.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Well, I'm starting to get it. Really, what you're saying is that you cut the cheque to Calgary Housing Authority, for instance, in much the same way that you cut the cheque, so to speak, to the Department of Employment and Immigration to administer the homeless and eviction prevention fund. Okay. It still seems a bit cumbersome to me, but I'm kind of getting the rationale behind it now. I thank you for that.

On the homeless and eviction prevention fund and the internal audit is the minister satisfied that the program, even though it falls under the purview, at least the administration of it, of Employment and Immigration, is being properly delivered now that the bugs have been worked out of the system? What checks are in place, what systems are in place to give staff direction on how to recover the funds that were incorrectly issued because of the administrative errors that the internal audit found? Can the minister tell us exactly how much was incorrectly disbursed?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This is an important question. I have directed my ministry staff to hold discussions with staff from Employment and Immigration, and that's to identify improvements that we can see may be needed to assist in delivering the program and to determine a time frame for a staged reduction on the program's expenditures. I'm also aware of the need to prevent further homelessness and eviction for Albertans most in need who currently have some form of modest income.

I'll go back to, you know, the creation of the 11,000 additional affordable housing units by 2012. We are going a fair way to reducing the requirement for the program, and as I said, we are on track with that. The evaluations of programs take place within a certain time frame. It is time, as I said, for this to be evaluated, and we would do that together with the Ministry of Employment and Immigration.

Mr. Taylor: How am I doing for time?

The Chair: Nine minutes.

Mr. Taylor: Nine. Okay.

The Chair: Oh, I'm sorry. Six minutes. It's 10:30. Sorry.

Mr. Taylor: Six minutes. Okay. Nine minutes eastern, right?

I might get an interesting answer in the time remaining to this question because it intrigues me. I don't see anything specific in the mandate letters; I didn't see anything specific in the throne speech; I don't see anything specific in the budget. I'm intrigued. I'm curious about the urban affairs part of the minister's portfolio. We've had, I think, a good and full discussion of the housing estimates tonight, but what is urban affairs going to morph into? Where are we going with that? What are the concerns of the urban affairs part of your portfolio? I believe it was described somewhere – whether it was in the throne speech or the mandate letter, I forget now – that, you know, this was to look at issues specific to big cities. But, gosh, there has been nothing about that since, and I'm really interested in hearing where the minister is going to take that part of her department.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Given the time frame I'll refer you back to our ministry's business plan. You're correct. Urban affairs was a new area within the ministry when it was created, and it's detailed there on page 171. Just in the short time I have, I can say that we've seen a rapid pace of economic growth here in Alberta, that has led to an increased population growth. As a result, the housing pressures increased, followed by an increasing demand for other public services and infrastructure, and those problems are particularly acute in our major urban centres.

Part of our ministry's mission was to help urban communities address the challenges of growth on housing, public services, and infrastructure. This was established, and it's new. Albertans in our cities should have access to affordable housing, but the neighbourhoods should be safe. They should have appropriate social and public services, and our ministry will work closely with other provincial government departments and urban municipalities to ensure that the unique needs of urban centres are identified and addressed. It's going to centralize on important functions that are based on the premise that good programs will emanate from good public policy, and those areas would include strategic policy, research, business planning, and performance overall. That's strategic with our government. It would include program evaluation. There are a number of areas that we can step into and assist with and learn from and work together.

Mr. Taylor: But all related to housing and, you know, safe housing and safe neighbourhoods. I'll grant you that. Or do you go beyond that to livable communities, urban transit, et cetera, et cetera? I mean, we have a number. The last line here says: "The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs will work closely with other provincial government departments and urban municipalities to ensure the unique needs of urban centres are identified and addressed." Well, there are unique housing needs. There's no question about that. We've established that, and we agree on that, I think. But there are many other unique needs, needs unique to Edmonton and Calgary, another set of needs perhaps unique to the mid-sized cities that we

have in this province but are very definitely urban needs. Is there going to be work done on those files?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm just giving the time as well to goal 3 in our business plan on page 174 identifying, as we said, the unique needs. Yes, I do like the concept of livable cities and the other areas that you had mentioned. We will be, as I said, addressing economic growth, safe and secure housing, public infrastructure, safe communities overall, and just as importantly we'll be working in partnership and co-operation, providing leadership and co-ordination in supporting our urban communities by addressing those areas overall. We will work with the municipalities, Mr. Chairman. I'm looking forward, actually, to this part of our portfolio. It's going to be one where I know I'll learn a great deal as a minister on how we can liaise with others in addressing their urban needs.

I think it's important, too, to work and co-ordinate cross-ministry, innovative initiatives to address our urban centres' issues as a result of our growth pressures. Also, Mr. Chairman, we're going to ensure ongoing access to and the timely release of suitable land for the purpose of developing more affordable housing in high-growth municipalities. I know that the picture that I'm showing you is just a lot of thought right now or, you might want to say, a plan to create a plan, but it's important.

10:30

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. minister. I will now invite the officials to leave the Assembly so we can rise and report progress.

Hon. members, please get back to your own seats. Pursuant to Standing Order 59.02(5) the Committee of Supply shall now rise and report progress.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: I would like to call on the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

Mr. Lund: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions for the Department of Housing and Urban Affairs relating to the 2008-09 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2009, reports progress, and requests to sit again.

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading
Bill 1
Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility
Agreement Implementation Statutes
Amendment Act, 2008

[Adjourned debate May 13: Ms Blakeman]

[Motion carried; Bill 1 read a second time]

Bill 4**Alberta Enterprise Corporation Act**

[Adjourned debate May 12: Mr. Snelgrove]

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise this evening and join second reading debate of Bill 4, the Alberta Enterprise Corporation Act. I'm going to make this a rather short debate. [some applause] No, don't all applaud at once. Okay, do it in sequence.

In all seriousness, no, I'm not talked out after three hours of debate on housing, but I will make this brief for other reasons, and that's basically because we support this bill in principle. The minister and I had the opportunity to discuss this before Bill 4 was actually introduced in the House. His thinking and the government's thinking on this bill is very much in line with our thinking in the Alberta Liberal caucus. We called for very much the same sort of idea back in 2004. In fact, we said that we would invest \$75 million, which would be at least matched by industry and universities, into an Alberta technology venture fund. As sometimes happens, government took one of our ideas and actually added to it. It's now going to be a hundred million dollars.

All jesting aside, though, we think that this is a good bill, the right direction to go. On that basis I'm prepared to support this at second reading, and we may get into a more detailed discussion in committee.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 4 read a second time]

Bill 3**Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2008**

[Adjourned debate May 14: Ms Pastoor]

[Motion carried; Bill 3 read a second time]

Bill 12**Teachers' Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2008**

Ms Evans: Thank you very much. I'm pleased to rise today to move second reading of Bill 12. It's an important interim step in implementing the memorandum of agreement with Alberta teachers under which government will assume responsibility for the teachers' share of the pre-1992 unfunded pension liability.

I have been asked to remind the House that this legislation specifically authorizes the Crown to pay the teachers' share of contributions related to the pre-1992 unfunded liability of the teachers' pension plan until September 1, 2009, at which time the Crown will assume full responsibility for the unfunded liability. Payments from September to December of 2007 were authorized by legislation approved last fall. The current amendment extends that authority and retroactively authorizes payments made since January 2008.

The agreement reached between government and teachers ensures no labour disruption involving members of the ATA for the next five years. Including government's original share, that liability now totals close to \$6.8 billion. Between now and September 2009 the government will develop a plan on how to deal with the total unfunded liability arising from the service prior to 1992.

Thank you. With that, I'd move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 13**Financial Institutions Statutes
Amendment Act, 2008**

Ms Evans: On behalf of the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill Bill 13 is an amendment to two statutes; specifically, the Alberta Treasury Branches Act and also the Credit Union Act. Principally, the amendments in the case of the Alberta Treasury Branches Act allow for addressing regulatory framework dealing with capital and further mandates certain specific clarity in reporting to government. Under the Credit Union Act it is very specifically laying out the procedures for complaints which may be made to credit unions. It is a piece of legislation that provides further clarity around the use of electronic mail and nonpresent voting by members. Both of the amendments contained in this particular Financial Institutions Statutes Amendment Act, 2008, lead to greater clarity and, quite frankly, are good for the consumer.

I would like to move second reading and adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

10:40

**Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading****Bill 2****Travel Alberta Act**

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, we need some member to move the bill first. The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation I would move third reading of Bill 2.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. I'm pleased the hon. House leader rose to the occasion.

I am concerned about one aspect of Bill 2, and that's the potential loss of local autonomy from local tourist agencies and sort of tourist information booths. I've had communication from both Fort Macleod and from Lethbridge indicating some concern from local tourism organizations that the funding that they have received for the last number of years may now be diverted to this contracted-out agency. I would very much appreciate receiving a response to that concern because to date I've been supportive. My only qualification was that we advertise the real Alberta and that the part of the real Alberta we're not happy with we improve upon so that when we're inviting people to this wonderful province, they get the full meal deal, so to speak, as opposed to some of the environmental concerns that are currently challenging.

If the hon. House leader can provide some clarity or direction as to whether local tourist agencies need to worry or whether the funding will continue and this funding for this corporation that will advertise Alberta will be on top of that local funding or in place of it.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To conclude debate on this bill, I can to the best of my knowledge certainly give the member the assurance that the local tourist associations should be very pleased with the change in governance on this organization. The details I will defer to the minister on and certainly draw to her attention that

the member brought this issue forward and ask her to respond in writing to the member with the appropriate response.

With that, I call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 2 read a third time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the fact that we

have accomplished much in a relatively short period of time, my list, unfortunately, has come to an end. [interjections] I think that given the encouragement from my members, perhaps from members on both sides of the House, I would like to move that the House now stand adjourned until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 10:45 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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