



Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday, October 27, 2009

Issue 50

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature

Second Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, October 27, 2009

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Guide us so that we may use the privilege given us as elected Members of the Legislative Assembly. Give us the strength to labour diligently, the courage to think and speak with clarity and conviction and without prejudice or pride. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Service Alberta.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you a very attentive class from Inglewood elementary school. The class made their way from Edmonton-Glenora to the Legislature today to take in a tour of the building and to witness the excitement of question period. Just before entering the Chamber, I had an opportunity to meet the students and pose for a picture as well. They are very excited to be here. I would like to thank the class for coming today, and I would now like to ask the students as well as their teacher, Rodney Corkum, and parent volunteer Wendy Heather to rise to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a group of 10 high school students from the Strathmore high school. These students are members of a political thought class that is here to tour the Legislature today and will in about 10 days also be travelling to Ottawa. They are accompanied today by their teachers, Mr. Rob Pirie and Mr. Steve Alexander. They are seated in the public gallery. I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Dr. Taft: Yes. Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Edmonton-Riverview, like all of Alberta, is a wonderfully diverse place, and it's a great pride for me that I have the distinct pleasure to introduce to you and through to all members of the Assembly the grade 6 class from l'école Notre-Dame, which is a school in my constituency, in fact only the second francophone school to be opened in Edmonton. Its mission is to bring la Francophonie to life for its students while letting them develop to their full potential. They are seated in the public gallery. They are accompanied by their teacher, M. LaRochelle. I would ask them to rise and accept the warm welcome of all members of the Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly 17 very bright grade 6 students from Norwood school in my constituency.

They're accompanied by their teacher, Ms Shannon Chinery, and parent Kim Eades. I'd ask that they please rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

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

Dr. Swann: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great honour to introduce to you and through you to the rest of the Assembly our two new researchers in the Alberta Liberal caucus, Ms Avril McCalla and Mr. Ben Whynot. I'll ask them to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't know if my guests have arrived or not, but I'd like to introduce two former colleagues of mine from Teck Coal, where I worked for 30 years: Mr. Terry Fredin, the general mine manager, and Mr. Mark Symbaluk, director of environment. I'd ask them to rise if they're here and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to take this opportunity to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly the co-chair of Greensense, an organization in Lethbridge. He's here today to highlight his support for green and renewable energy, and I would like to ask Tom Cain to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you to the Assembly roughly 50 members of the Coalition for a Nuclear Free Alberta. The coalition is an umbrella group of about a dozen grassroots organizations from across the province. The coalition's objective is to raise awareness about the true risks and costs of nuclear power. They believe that this province will do better to invest in renewable energy alternatives. They're here because they've not been invited to any open conversation with the government about nuclear power. I would now ask that my guests rise. I hope they are here. I saw them waiting outside on the way in. If they are seated in both the members' and the public galleries, please rise to receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Hon. members, today is the anniversary of his arrival on the planet Earth, the birthday of the hon. Member for Peace River. Please join with me in conveying appropriate wishes.

Members' Statements

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

Child Abuse Awareness Month

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. October is Child Abuse Awareness Month and as such is the perfect time to learn more about the negative impacts of child abuse and neglect on families and on society as well as to consider how we can work together to stop it from happening. I trust we can all agree that no child should have to live in fear, especially of their parents or loved ones. No matter what the circumstances are, no child should ever be victimized. Preventing child abuse and neglect is a community responsibility.

It is reliant upon family members, neighbours, teachers, health professionals, and all others involved in a child's life to report any suspicions they may have about possible abuse or neglect.

During Child Abuse Awareness Month Albertans are encouraged to call the confidential child abuse hotline to report situations of suspected abuse or neglect. Anyone who suspects a child or youth is being abused can call 1.800.387.KIDS. Mr. Speaker, over 8,600 calls were received last month alone, and each of those calls represents a child or youth who may have been at risk. I commend callers for their courage in stepping forward. Any one of those calls may have helped a family cope with a stressful situation that could have brought harm to a child. Any one of those calls may have saved a life.

I encourage individuals and communities to support children, youth, and families by continuing to be vigilant in reporting abuse or neglect. In doing so, we'll create stronger and safer communities here in Alberta.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Waste Reduction Week

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week we celebrated the ninth annual Waste Reduction Week in Canada, and people from across the country and this great province took part in activities to help reduce waste and divert waste from landfill. Celebrations like this remind us how we need to start looking at waste as a resource.

Government showed leadership recently by providing Ecotrust grant funding to two projects to do just that. One is a plant in Drayton Valley, the second project to join the Bio-Mile, that will convert waste product from the forest industry to energy. I am proud to see this initiative move forward in my hometown because it will create forest-related jobs, reduce our environmental footprint, and will help with the long-term sustainability of the community.

The second is a project that will transfer waste heat from the city of Edmonton to homes in Strathcona county. When the city of Edmonton's plant is fully operational, the city will divert 90 per cent of its waste from landfill.

During Waste Reduction Week I had the pleasure of visiting two schools, Aurora elementary school in Drayton Valley and Our Lady of Peace school here in Edmonton. Grade 4 students in these schools reminded me of the kind of enthusiasm children have for making changes to the recycling habits in their communities. Participating classes registered and conducted a five-day waste audit in the classroom and pledged to reduce waste in the classroom for the rest of the year. Throughout the year we can take steps in our homes, our workplaces, and for our future leaders in the classroom because our resources are indeed too good to waste.

That's why I'm encouraged by the results of increasing beverage container recycling across the province. Since last October beverage container recycling in the province has now risen from 76 per cent to 81 per cent. Our goal was to reach 85 per cent in just three years, so we're well on our way. And since dairy containers have been added to the bottle depot return system, we have already seen significant changes in the recycling behaviours of Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

1:40

House of Refuge Mission

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For over 25 years the House of Refuge Mission has provided food and other aid to the

poor and homeless of downtown Edmonton. House of Refuge always welcomes everyone with warm food, coffee, and spiritual comfort. It is open to all seven days a week, 365 days a year. But on October 22 the mission was issued a closure statement by Alberta Health Services for reasons of public safety. The mission remains open to serve coffee, juice, and prepackaged food, but they can no longer provide the hearty prepared foods such as soups and sandwiches that their clients depend upon.

The good people who run the mission realize that they need to provide a safer, more sanitary environment, but in their own words they are "rich in Spiritual resources [but] poor in practical resources." So today I would ask the community to please step up and help the mission with the practical resources they need to continue their work to provide to those who need it most.

The House of Refuge Mission needs the following: legal aid to determine their best course of action, financial assistance to repair their current rented property or help with finding a new property that meets Alberta Health Services' requirements, assistance in finding prepared foods for the downtown homeless people who won't be able to go to the mission and get a hearty meal until this crisis is resolved, and, finally, some short-term action from this government to feed and clothe the homeless while long-term solutions move forward.

The mission serves between 100 and 300 homeless citizens each and every night, people who for whatever reason don't have access to other charitable resources. These folks have no support system, often very little beyond the clothes on their back. The mission does important work that deserves the support of our community. I urge both citizens and government to help get the mission and its people that they serve so well back on their feet.

Thank you.

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

Alberta Hospital Edmonton Implementation Team

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On October 6 the hon. the Premier directed the establishment of an implementation team to provide oversight with respect to changes proposed for Alberta Hospital Edmonton. As the Premier's designate on the committee I'd like to provide an update on our work.

We have three tasks: first, review and, where necessary, recommend changes to future plans for Alberta Hospital Edmonton, including proposed transfers of some existing beds to community-based settings and general hospitals; second, consult with clinical staff, employees, community stakeholders, and, most importantly, patients and their families to ensure their concerns are thoroughly considered; and third, consistent with the Premier's commitment, ensure that community-based mental health resources necessary to support patients affected by any change are in place before implementation proceeds.

Our members, Mr. Speaker, are community and patient focused. We are conducting a systematic and detailed review of proposed changes in three of the hospital's four program areas: geriatric psychiatry, adult acute psychiatry, and rehabilitation psychiatry. As previously announced, forensic services will remain at the present site. Our consultations with patients, staff, and stakeholders will run concurrently with a review of each program area.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier's direction in this matter is a powerful statement about the importance this government places on mental health and mental health care. In the final analysis, this exercise is not about buildings. It is about people and, specifically, how we care for our families, friends, and neighbours affected by mental illness in the communities where they live.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I want to be very clear. Our government is committed to making mental health service delivery part of mainstream health care delivery. This means offering access to more mental health services in the community where it is in the interest of patients to do so and not until the necessary community supports are in place. Albertans suffering with mental illness and the 1 in 5 of us that will follow them deserve no less.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Piikani First Nation Housing Project

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I had the honour of attending an event to commemorate a unique training partnership at the Piikani First Nation community in Brocket on October 2. This is a joint project between Alberta Employment and Immigration and the federal government as well as the Piikani First Nation. The project provides much-needed housing while at the same is training 32 members of the Piikani First Nation in the trades of carpentry, plumbing, electrical, and welding. They can now take that training and apply it to a career that will benefit them and their families as well as their community.

The Piikani First Nation also benefits greatly from this project. There will be 12 new homes built in the community, the first new homes, Mr. Speaker, in 15 years.

For the people of the Piikani community the event symbolized what can be accomplished through the power of believing. I was touched to see many of the people who attended the event that day wear red T-shirts with the word “believe” in bold white letters across their backs. If we are to be successful in lowering the unemployment rate for aboriginal Albertans, all of us must believe in projects such as this one.

The project has been a success in this community, and there are many more just like it happening in other communities across Alberta. I am excited to see what can be accomplished through the power of belief and partnerships.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Firefighters and Military Personnel

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with great humility that I rise today to pay honour to those who serve with pride and protect us when we need them the most. Last Wednesday and Thursday I had the privilege with a number of my caucus colleagues to experience and learn about the extreme challenges that face both our firefighters and military personnel. Also last week we became very aware of a frightening and unfortunate situation that unfolded up the street at the WCB offices, a situation that could have been much worse if it weren't for the professionalism and expertise of our law enforcement officers.

Mr. Speaker, with this fresh in my mind I wanted to take the opportunity to thank all of the men and women in our province and right across Canada who put on a uniform every day to serve and protect us in the most difficult of circumstances. These individuals are the most selfless in our society, putting their lives on the line for our safety, security, and happiness. From crawling through a burning house without being able to see because of thick toxic smoke, sometimes not finding the source of the fire until surrounded by flames, or scouring the hinterland of Afghanistan for weeks at a time, living out of nothing but a light armoured vehicle while requiring a constant state of alertness, or remaining calm and

professional after being thrust into a volatile situation, where every move you make could cost lives, these are the day-to-day experiences of our brave men and women in uniform.

I also want to thank the families and loved ones of these men and women. Mr. Speaker, I can't imagine the feeling of kissing or hugging a loved one each and every time they went off to work knowing that it was possible that they may not return home the same or even at all. I would love to call these men and women and their families heroic, but I can't. It does not even begin to justify or describe the sacrifices that they make. These people are our guardian angels. They show up in times when we need them the most, when our safety and security are threatened, and in the most dire and trying of circumstances.

Mr. Speaker, I know that Thanksgiving was a few weeks ago, but it took me until last week to figure out what I'm truly thankful for the most.

Introduction of Bills

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

Bill 54

Personal Information Protection Amendment Act, 2009

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce Bill 54, the Personal Information Protection Amendment Act, 2009.

Mr. Speaker, this bill is a direct result of the hard work of the Select Special Personal Information Protection Act Review Committee, an all-party special committee of the Legislature that in 2006 undertook a complete review of the act and tabled a report to the Legislature in November 2007 outlining recommendations for amendments. This bill incorporates a number of their proposed amendments.

The main proposals for change include emerging issues such as notifying the commissioner or individuals about security breaches that place personal information at risk and informing individuals when services involving personal information are occurring outside of Canada. Mr. Speaker, as required for any new legislation in a rapidly evolving area, this bill also does some updating and fine-tuning of the existing provisions of this act.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 54 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill 54 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

H1N1 Influenza Vaccination

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government has been warned for the past year that its handling of Alberta Health Services was creating an organizational train wreck. Albertans are now living that train wreck, and they're angry. Yesterday this government said that it had only days to get ready for the pandemic vaccine, yet national news stories since September 16 were telling the country that vaccines would be out in the third week of October. To the

Premier. Your minister has had more than a month to prepare, and he has failed. What do you say to Albertans who are standing in the cold and wet for hours because your government created health care chaos?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, let's put this in perspective. This is the largest flu vaccination program of its kind in the history of the province of Alberta. I want to acknowledge all of the hard work of the front-line health care providers for the many, many hours administering the flu vaccine. Any other detail the minister of health will cover.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have direct reports, corroborated by photographs which I'll table later, that large numbers of workstations in the big-city immunization clinics are unstaffed while Albertans shiver in lineups for hours. To the Premier: how can it be that Albertans have to wait outside while immunization stations are unstaffed?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think it's important to put things in perspective. In this province today the health care system is delivering health care uninterrupted, the way it did yesterday, the way it did a month ago and a year ago. We are undergoing, as the Premier said, the largest immunization in the history of this country. So above that delivery model, that is operating on an hour-to-hour basis throughout the province, we layer over this mass immunization program. Alberta Health Services has made best efforts to go and recruit as many health professionals as they possibly can. They are doing an outstanding job. I must admit that the take-up by Albertans has been significantly higher than we anticipated out of the chute on this program, and that's a good thing. We will work towards ensuring that all Albertans can be accommodated as soon as possible.

Dr. Swann: That's hardly credible, Mr. Speaker, when in past immunization clinics there were dozens of centres for providing immunization. Why have we cut back, then?

Finally, to the Premier. There are widespread reports that some government MLAs have had special immunization clinics provided. Can the minister of wellness confirm whether or not special provisions were made for government members?

Mr. Liepert: Well, if there were special provisions, they must have been for those guys over there, Mr. Speaker, because I can tell you that unless one of our members is in that higher risk category, we will be in line like everyone else. To make those accusations is politicizing an unfortunate situation, and I would suggest that if this member has got evidence as to who he's talking about, table it in this Legislature.

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

H1N1 Influenza Pandemic Planning

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since last spring we've been hearing from across the province – from physicians, nurses, technicians, administrators, from the public – that Alberta Health Services is in organizational paralysis 18 months after the last re-organization. Because of the decisions of this Minister of Health and Wellness we now see evidence in the H1N1 as a symptom of

this. To the Premier: what is he doing to hold this minister of health accountable for this mess in the health care system today?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, on any average day within the province of Alberta over 5,300 people are at some emergent care centre; another 500 are in an urgent care centre; 165,000 laboratory tests on an average day; 27,000 hours of home care provided; 140 babies born, on the average, every day. That's good. A mini baby boom in the province of Alberta tells us that people still look at Alberta as a land of opportunity. At least 700 are going through emergency in an ambulance on any given day. And we spend about \$30 million a day on health care in this province. That's what's happening in the province of Alberta.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, it's become all too common in recent years for every acute-care bed to be plugged in Calgary and Edmonton; in other words, not a single hospital bed available in either big city. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: as this pandemic begins to hit, is it true that there's no surge capacity in existing beds to take care of H1N1 victims?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think we can stand here and we can fearmonger and try and scare the public all we want. But what I've noticed in the last 24 hours is that the public has said, "We are taking this situation seriously; we are going to get vaccinated because we do not want to be in emergency taking up hospital beds," as the member alludes to. Now, I can say that in the past week we have had 12 hospitalizations, not out of the ordinary, so there is no indication, that I'm aware of, that what the member is alluding to is actually occurring. We do recognize, however, that the crest of this flu will probably happen sometime in November, and that's why it's important over the next two or three weeks for people to get vaccinated.

Dr. Swann: One of the tents bought to provide extra capacity in case of pandemic has been operating for 18 months as the emergency ward at the Stollery children's hospital. Will this tent be emptied and converted for pandemic purposes? If so, what will happen to the normal emergency demands at the Stollery, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, actually there's a plan that doesn't include what this particular member is referring to. Let me be clear. As of Thursday we're expecting another shipment of the vaccine. That will allow us enough vaccine dosage to now start distributing across the province to physicians and hopefully by next week to pharmacists. We've got some 400 certified pharmacists who can administer the vaccine. We will be having it available in some of the health clinics around the province. We have to remember that there was a limited amount of vaccine at the initial tranche because, despite what this member says, the original intent was that this vaccine would not be available until November. It's earlier than anticipated. That's a good thing. I would suggest that when we get into this time next week, I think this vaccine will be available across the province in a number of areas – physicians' offices, pharmacies – and they'll go on to some other issue.

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

Critical Electricity Transmission Infrastructure

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are for the Premier. The parliamentary assistant for Energy was recently

quoted as saying that next week's meetings of the Standing Committee on Resources and Environment would be, in effect, a public consultation giving the public an opportunity to discuss Bill 50, and the Premier indicated as much yesterday in his answers to my questions in question period. But the standing committee is not holding hearings on Bill 50 next Monday or Wednesday night because Bill 50 has never been referred to it. To the Premier: why is the government claiming the public will be able to have their say on Bill 50 when that's not the case?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, again, very selective hearing on behalf of the member. I listed as to who will be present at the meetings, I believe, on the 2nd and the 4th. There will be some people talking about grizzly bears. There will be some people presenting a topic on green energy. There will be some from Enmax if they accept the invitation. There will be some from other generators, and they will talk about the value of generating electricity from all sources in the province of Alberta. There may even be some discussion about transmission. But the issue here is a little bit of a play on words. When we talk about committee, the committee is here. It's one of the stages of the bill. So here in this Legislature, once the bill goes into committee stage, we will have a full and open debate in the Legislative Assembly, right here.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bill 50 will result in billions of dollars' worth of infrastructure getting slapped on Albertans, yet this government's response to the outcry over this is a discussion on grizzly bears along with some presentations from some of the power generators. Look, I don't suppose grizzlies like big, high-voltage power pylons in their backyards anymore than anybody else does, but doesn't the Premier see that this closed, undemocratic forcing through of this bill is completely and utterly inappropriate?

2:00

Mr. Stelmach: Well, I guess if the Liberals aren't interested in grizzly bears, then they don't have to attend. They don't have to listen if they're not interested in wildlife. All I know, Mr. Speaker, is that in the province of Alberta we lose about \$250 million worth of generated electricity because of congestion and old transmission lines. We also know that we're growing demand the equivalent of two cities of Red Deer every year. We also fully understand that if we're going to grow the value-added, we need more energy in different parts of the province, especially the Industrial Heartland and Fort McMurray.

We'll have, again, the opportunity to talk about the bill, debate it here in the House just like any other regular bill. We laid it over the spring so that people could read the bill, bring their comments to their MLAs, and that's where the debate will take place.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I guess we could get into a discussion at another time about which one of us is the grizzly and which one is the salmon, but we'll leave that for another time.

The dissent over Bill 50 is widespread, Mr. Speaker. Even the PC Constituency Association of Foothills-Rocky View has a resolution going in front of next week's convention of that party asking that "the government of Alberta not proceed with Bill 50 in the fall session of the Alberta Legislature." Why won't the Premier listen to all of these concerns with this multibillion-dollar boondoggle and pull this flawed bill from the government agenda?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, well, at least we have a party that's open and transparent and actually has people that come to an annual meeting as opposed to the Liberals, that I don't know even if they do have an annual meeting and nobody brings up issues within their discussion.

All I know is that we've had a number of public consultations on need. We're going to discuss the bill here in the House. We'll debate it just like any other bill that comes before the House, and they'll have equal opportunity to get up and talk about the bill and make all kinds of different allegations. But at the end of the day we know that we have to move the electricity from one corner of this province to another. It's got to be done much more efficiently and effectively. I don't know why in the world we'd be burning more coal, creating more carbon, and still getting less electricity to the consumer.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

H1N1 Influenza Immunization for High-risk Albertans

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. The health minister's handling of the H1N1 vaccine program is failing to reach high-risk communities, where early immunization should have been targeted. The minister doesn't care about inoculating the homeless or aboriginal and First Nations communities. Yet in Edmonton there is no program in place to inoculate the homeless. The H1N1 flu shot should have been available in shelters from the start. This government's flu vaccine program has been badly planned, badly organized, and badly led. My question is to the Premier. Why have you allowed your health minister to ignore the vulnerable communities, who are at the greatest risk of being cut down by the H1N1 virus?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, our housing minister has the full details on how we will be preparing to immunize all of the homeless people in the province of Alberta.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd be very pleased to meet with this member – I know that we did address this question yesterday in question period – and actually go to the good organizations we have in Edmonton that are offering the vaccine to our homeless. We could go to the Hope Mission, which has a well-established tradition of 80 years of looking after our homeless, and Boyle Street. There are a number of good organizations. We've had some very, very good staff – Susan McGee, whom I am sure you know, and others – who have been working on that pandemic plan.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I don't know how the housing minister knows about an immunization program, but I can tell her and I can tell this House that the agencies in the inner city of Edmonton cannot get the vaccine, cannot get word from Alberta Health about when they'll be able to start offering that vaccine. I have no idea what the health minister knows about that, if anything, but certainly the question is to the Premier: why has this government failed the homeless, the people in shelters and rooming houses, who are four times more likely to die a premature death because they are so vulnerable? Why have you ignored them? Why haven't you provided vaccine for them, Mr. Premier?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, you know what? I'm going to take the word of this nurse over any bus driver any doggone time.

Mr. Mason: Well, Mr. Speaker, you know, we could all refer to each other by our previous occupations. I could do that to the Premier, but it's beneath me. It should be beneath him as well. We're all members of this Assembly, Mr. Premier. Your arrogance is beyond belief.

I want to know why aboriginal groups will not get the H1N1 flu shot immediately. They're lagging behind in remote and impoverished communities. This government's own MLAs are saying that a single clinic is expected to service 45 remote northern communities where many aboriginals and First Nations groups live. How can the Premier explain that from the very outset his immunization program ignores aboriginal communities at greatest risk of contracting the H1N1 virus?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Instead of rising on a point of order, why don't I just set the member straight right now and save the House some time later? We have an aboriginal communities initiative that involves people from the First Nations. It involves people from the Métis settlements. It involves people from the Métis Nation of Alberta. It's an extremely effective group. I can tell you that we've already ensured that vaccinations have been provided to the majority of the communities that are referenced. At the same time, we also have the five zones set up by Alberta Health Services, and the aboriginal community members are working with them. We also have 20 native friendship centres that are disseminating this information so that full access to the clinics will be available. In most cases it already is, and if not, it should be available by the end of this week.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

H1N1 Influenza Immunization for Aboriginal Albertans

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in Alberta live in rural and isolated communities. In Bonnyville-Cold Lake I have two Métis settlements and three First Nations. The federal immunization priority list has identified the aboriginal population as a priority group to receive the H1N1 vaccine. My questions are to the Minister of Aboriginal Relations. I want to ensure that my aboriginal communities are a priority in this government's response to H1N1. What is the plan for H1N1 vaccination for the First Nations in Alberta?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, the aboriginal communities are definitely a priority for our government and for the government of Canada, and we're working very closely on the response plan to ensure that the H1N1 vaccine is provided to all the reserves in Alberta as well as all the Métis settlements. I just commented on the MNA group and the people living off settlement and off reserve. However, we're also working with the Public Health Agency of Canada and with our own aboriginal communities committee, which is charged with the responsibility of ensuring that these clinics are up and running as quickly as possible.

I'll just close by saying that I've just spoken to a number of chiefs today just to verify that the vaccines have arrived. They have, and in most cases they're already being provided through the clinics' vaccination programs. So we know it's working.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the same minister. Given that the federal government plays a lead role in supporting First Nations people living on reserves, can the minister tell us what steps are being taken to ensure that residents of the Métis settlements are also getting access to the same level of support?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, among other things we have the provincial Emergency Management Agency, which is working with the local municipalities to ensure that there are no gaps in the provisions for the planning of the H1N1 clinics nor in prevention initiatives to stop it from ever taking root.

Specific to your riding, hon. member, I can tell you that the Elizabeth Métis settlement has the vaccine. I can tell you that the Fishing Lake settlement has the vaccine, and they have been vaccinating since 2 o'clock today. I guess they've just started. So there are plans already in place, and the rest will be up and operational very soon, in a matter of days.

Mrs. Leskiw: Mr. Speaker, my final question is to the same minister. Given that close to 65 per cent of aboriginal people in Alberta live in urban communities, are there any special strategies to overcome the challenges faced by these individuals?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, we in Aboriginal Relations are working very closely with the Ministry of Health and Wellness. We're in touch with them on a daily basis. I can assure you that the five zones that I referred to earlier are ready and up and running, and they're receiving aboriginal people as one of the priority groups along with others that the Minister of Health and Wellness and our Premier have mentioned as being in the vulnerable area. So the planning is in place. There are no gaps so far. We care deeply about all Albertans and will ensure that they get the services they require in this respect.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

2:10

Physician Supply

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Throughout this summer we've been hearing loud and clear that Albertans are concerned about access to a family doctor, whether it's getting a family doctor in the first place or getting in to see the doctor in a timely fashion. For example, almost 20 per cent of Calgarians do not have a family doctor. To the Minister of Health and Wellness. Alberta is growing, and we are losing ground and falling behind the target for family doctors per person. Why isn't the government doing more to encourage physicians to enter family practice?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's not quite that simple. Let me explain the situation that actually does occur in Calgary. We have a PCN at Crowfoot village mall that has moved to a different model of delivering health care. They've moved to a team-based model. They're using other professionals in delivering health care. They're under a different payment system, and they're seeing 25 per cent more patients. So I would suggest that if 25 per cent of Albertans don't have a family doctor – if all of our physicians moved to team-based care under a different payment model, that would allow us to have those 25 per cent who don't have family doctors all getting team-based care in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Well, thanks. To the same minister: then is the minister saying the government is abandoning its targets for increasing the number of family physicians per capita?

Mr. Liepert: I don't think that if the member checked *Hansard*, he would see that at all. The Minister of Advanced Education can elaborate if he so chooses, but we're actually increasing our number of seats at the postsecondary institutions and medical school. In fact, I met with some of them yesterday. They are very pleased with the move that the government is making relative to rural initiatives. They are very pleased about the fact that they're going to have opportunities to work in team-based care, Mr. Speaker, and they very much believe like we do: if you keep doing things the same way you've always done them, you're likely not to get any different results.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Well, thanks, Mr. Speaker. Actually, the medical students are very concerned that the rural integrated community clerkship program, it is rumoured, is being cut. I ask the minister here in the Assembly today: can the minister make a commitment to increase the number of medical students who choose to practice in rural settings, and will he continue to see that the rural integrated community clerkship program is supported and expanded?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, now I know why they came into my office wondering if this program was going to be cut: because they probably met with this member, who was spreading rumours, before they were at my meeting.

I can assure this Assembly, although we have not finalized our budget for next year, that if that was one of the things that I put on the table with this caucus, with these rural members, I'd be run out of the room.

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

Alberta Hospital Edmonton

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Over the past two months there has been a great deal of confusion over the changes at Alberta Hospital Edmonton. I have heard from my constituents that these changes are going to result in mental health patients being forced onto the street. How can the minister allow this to happen?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I'm not surprised that this member has heard this from constituents because I heard these irresponsible statements across the floor here just yesterday from the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. They are absolutely irresponsible statements. What we have so often been accused of on this side of the House is: well, what's the plan? So we roll out a three-year plan for the treatment of mental health patients, and then you have these kinds of statements that scare that member's constituents, and I understand why that is. We will not move one patient until we have the community setting that treats that patient in an environment that is superior to where they are today.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is to the same minister. Two months after it was announced that the Alberta

Hospital site would not be redeveloped, an implementation team was put in place. Can the minister tell us what this committee has done and why this work was not done in the first place?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that in hindsight there are probably occasions when every one of the members in this House would take a look at what we've done and maybe would have done something a little bit differently. So you take a pause. You say: is there a way that we can ensure that this particular rollout is going to be smoother than what we've got as the belief out there? The Premier has asked me, and we have appointed a committee. The Member for Edmonton-Rutherford delivered a very impassioned statement in this House today a little earlier very much outlining what the committee work is going to entail. I'm very confident that this committee made up of stakeholders, many of them involved in the mental health community, is going to ensure that this transition is a smooth one.

Mr. Sandhu: Mr. Speaker, my final question is to the same minister. We don't need to be causing more stress on the mental health patients and their families. There's so much confusion out there. Can the minister give the House any detail on the plan for the patients and their families?

Thank you.

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, one of the things that I think is not well known is that on any given day in the capital region of the province there are more mental health acute beds in service outside of Edmonton hospital than inside Edmonton hospital. On a daily basis patients are moving back and forth from the community to Edmonton hospital, and that will continue. So if you happen to read by open letters from certain physicians or certain psychiatrists at Alberta Hospital that there are actually patients moving back and forth between the Edmonton institution and the community, yes, there are. Always have been; always will be. But I can assure you that as recently as yesterday in discussions with Dr. Duckett there is no intention to move any unit from Edmonton hospital into the community before April, May of 2010.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, you rose on a point of order as a result of something the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness said in response to the first question of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Mason: Yes. I think he meant someone else, Mr. Speaker. I didn't talk about mental health yesterday.

The Speaker: You want to rise on a point of order later?

Mr. Mason: No. That's good enough.

The Speaker: Okay. Well, fine. We're making progress. This is good.

Lethbridge-East, followed by Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Conversion of Agricultural Land

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have now been given the agricultural portfolio to be the critic for, so the Minister of Health and Wellness will just have to wait for another day.

Agricultural land loss poses a very real threat to agricultural producers in Alberta; 86 per cent of the land we've lost has gone to residential subdivision, oil and gas activity. This government invests

hundreds of millions of dollars in agriculture, yet conversion and loss of land continue to accelerate. Alberta must continue to have internationally competitive agricultural practices. To the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. We can't wait any longer. What concrete measures have you put in place in the last year to protect agricultural land?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I congratulate the Member for Lethbridge-East for being the agriculture critic. And I congratulate her for the question because now we get in on some sanity. She didn't ask a question that was fearmongering because the question is a true question, and it is a bit of a fear for us in Alberta. I appreciate the question.

Agriculture and Rural Development certainly is concerned about the agricultural land that's disappearing out there. Unfortunately, it happens around the big cities, all the cities, the big towns, the more progressive towns. It's a problem that we have out there, a problem that we intend to deal with. We know that the land-use policy and property rights, Mr. Speaker, certainly are very important issues to our agricultural producers.

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. To the same minister, of course: what are the definitive plans to ensure that our farmers aren't selling off the back 40 to survive?

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, we have some issues in the works, thank goodness, Mr. Speaker. We certainly know that the fragmentation and conversion of agricultural land is important to all Albertans and, indeed, to all municipalities. I encourage all Albertans and municipalities to join in with the minister of sustainable resources with his land-use framework. It's an important part of it. It'll be important to you, hon. member. The South Saskatchewan River basin, of course, is coming up this year. They've put together a committee. It's largely agricultural, but it's an across-the-board committee. I would certainly encourage you and your people to get involved in that part of it because a huge part of it is going to be devoted to land use.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. That partly answers my third question because what I was going to ask you is what you've done to ensure that the protection of the agricultural land is a priority in the land-use framework regional plan. Perhaps you could speak to that. You have a bit. Please elaborate.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a priority, of course. But, you know, as ag minister it's a priority for me, it's a priority for my department, but it certainly has to be a priority for the agriculture people out there. They're the ones that have to get involved in this. They have to make their thoughts and worries and fears, whatever they may be, known. They have to get to the people on this board. There are going to be consultation meetings, I understand, but we have to be more involved. I sometimes think that agriculture is the weak sister in all the land-use framework, so I appreciate where you're coming from because it's certainly where I intend to go with agriculture.

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

Deposit-refund System

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's been less than six months since the government introduced milk containers into the deposit-refund system. Most constituents I've talked to about this change think it's a good idea, but not everyone is convinced. I've also heard from nonprofit groups such as food banks who say that they face added expenses. My questions are to the Minister of Environment. Doesn't the addition of milk into the deposit system provide too much hardship for food banks and other charities, especially as we move towards the Christmas season?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me be very clear at the outset that we completely support the work that a lot of these nonprofit organizations are doing, and we'll do everything that we can to assist them and appreciate some of the financial pressures that they're under. But let's also not forget that the goal of this program is to increase the amount of recycling and keep containers out of landfills. I'm pleased to report that to that end a number of the organizations that are involved with processing these containers, from the handling facilities all the way through to the dairy board, are meeting as we speak and trying to seek some solutions to assist some of these very worthy nonprofit organizations to deal with some of the pressures that they're under.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My supplemental to the same minister. Many communities already have an effective voluntary recycling system in place. In fact, Calgary just introduced curbside recycling this spring. So why make this change?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I applaud some of the work of some of the municipalities throughout the province. But I have to remind the member that there are only limited parts of the province that are covered by such a program and that even under that program the return rate was not nearly approaching the 85 per cent that we've set as a target. We believe that by raising the issue of milk containers and including them in a deposit-based system, we should have similar kinds of results that we're experiencing with juice and pop.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplement to the same minister: has the introduction of milk into the deposit system really made a difference in recycling rates? Mr. Minister, what percentage of containers are being recycled under this initiative?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, it's early in the process to make conclusive statements, but clearly the imposition of deposits has had a tremendous effect on the return rate. In fact, the numbers have almost tripled from what they were prior to the deposits being in place. The detailed results have been reported, and we will be releasing those details on the exact percentages tomorrow.

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

Water Allocation in the Crowsnest Pass

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Minister of Environment gave assurances that there is enough water for new development despite the fact that the South Saskatchewan River basin is closed to new water licences and Okotoks and Strathmore are projected to run out of water in the next couple of years. To the Minister of Environment. The Crowsnest Pass was denied a water licence last year because of the closure to the water basin. So why does the minister continue to say that there is enough water for new development?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, what this member forgets is that the per capita consumption of water in southern Alberta is tremendously higher than similar kinds of communities elsewhere in the world. So there's an opportunity there, a huge opportunity, if we get our act together with respect to water conservation. But I've also said and I said yesterday that the reason that we're engaging in the review of the water allocation system is to provide for a way of having the existing water users share available water with some of the new users.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. Given that the Crowsnest Pass is appealing for their right to drinking water, with court costs at about \$20,000 for their municipality, and that last year the province spent \$85 million in a lawsuit over water rights, how much of the taxpayer money is the minister willing to spend before he moves on new water rights legislation?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, the appeal that the member refers to is the subject of the Environmental Appeals Board. I'm not going to comment on that because at the end of the day the final decision rests with me, and it would be inappropriate for me to comment until I've received the advice from that board. But I must say that the rhetoric that's coming out of this member is incredible. We have taken a proactive approach. We've talked about the need for us to review our legislation, to provide for a facility so that the water – and I remind the member that the amount of water is a finite amount of water, not infinite. We can't go on assuming that we can just issue licences whenever and wherever they're requested.

Ms Blakeman: Back to the same minister. So, Mr. Speaker, Albertans do not have secure access to water, to drinking water. We don't have a fair allocation system. The first in time, first in right is an archaic system, and it sucks, frankly. We don't have enough water left over to protect our ecosystems. For more than a year now the minister has been saying that he might possibly, maybe, at some point, is thinking about, should get around to doing something. Mr. Minister, can you put a date on this review, on this legislation, on the Water Act that's going to be before us? Put a date on it.

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, the member talks about the last year and, in her words, the inaction on the part of this minister. I'd remind this member that we've had a thorough review and recommendations from the Water Council through their WATSUP committee. Dr. David Percy from the University of Alberta has provided me with a detailed recommendation and review of the system. We've had the Alberta water institute doing an interjurisdictional review. All of those reports are now on my desk. They are being combined and put into a policy. I can advise the member that that policy will be ready to bring forward to the public either later on this fall or early next spring.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Little Bow.

Nuclear Power Consultation

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, Albertans from across the province are saying that they are not interested in bringing nuclear power to our province, but instead of listening to what they have to say, the most secretive government in Canada chose to meet behind closed doors with only selected participants. Will the Minister of Energy today release the results of their managed consultation so that the rest of Albertans can get in on the discussion and tell this government once and for all that they don't want nuclear power in our province?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The short answer to that question is no because I don't have the report. When it's available, when they've finished doing the work, at that point in time we will assess it and make Albertans aware of the result.

2:30

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, in contrast to Alberta, Saskatchewan held a transparent public hearing process that began in July and ended in August of 2009, and they released the findings last month. They reported over 80 per cent opposition to nuclear power. Now the government of Saskatchewan is backing away from it because it's too expensive and it's unreliable. Why won't the Minister of Energy come clean with Albertans, admit that nuclear power is not viable, and move on to real efforts to build renewable energy in this province?

Mr. Knight: Mr. Speaker, again, I'm not able to speak for the energy minister or the Premier of the province of Saskatchewan, but what I can do is indicate to you that there are probably at least three times more people in the province of Alberta that we need to consult with in the first place. Should it take a little bit longer to get it right? I believe so. That's exactly what we're intending to do. We will get this right, and when Albertans have given us what they think is the answer relative to this issue, we will make that available to Albertans.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, I find that very interesting because, in fact, in Saskatchewan they had public hearings, with over 2,600 people attending. How many people showed up to your public hearings? None.

We know that in order to be a viable source of energy for Alberta, at least four nuclear power plants would have to be built, at a cost of somewhere around \$30 billion. Today in Alberta there are wind-powered projects just waiting for approval that would bring the power of one of those plants online immediately at a fraction of the cost with none of the risks. Why won't the Minister of Energy listen to the few Albertans he has consulted, talk to the rest of them, and reject once and for all the costly, inefficient, and environmentally unsustainable spectre of nuclear power?

Mr. Knight: Mr. Speaker, the fact of the matter is that there is not a single application from the province of Alberta or Saskatchewan that I'm aware of that's in front of the nuclear regulators in Canada today, none.

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

Education Funding Formulas

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've been hearing from three of the school boards in our riding about recent cuts of some \$80 million to school board budgets. In addition, I think many of us have seen the ads where the ATA and the ASBA have expressed their interest in this issue. To the minister: if investing in our education is really so critical to the economic prosperity and recovery of this province, why would the minister contemplate taking some \$80 million from some of our school boards when they themselves feel it would be counterproductive?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When the budget was presented earlier this year, it was clear that there was an in-year adjustment that was going to be required, and every department was asked to do a value review of their functions to determine what savings could be made to meet that target for the adjustment. Our assigned target was \$80 million. We looked at what was happening in our department, and we took \$24 million out of the budget to the department by seeing what could be deferred, what could be done differently, how we could do it in a different way. That's 20 per cent of the budget to the department itself. The others were assigned to the school boards to come out of reserves.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While I accept the explanation, as a former trustee myself the question begs answering: why would a board that is fiscally prudent and puts money aside for identified projects be penalized or have money taken back when those boards who haven't been as fiscally prudent have nothing to contribute?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, what we were trying to accomplish was to make sure that the students in the classroom were not affected by this adjustment. That was the important outcome that was necessary for the process. When we went to the school boards, we first adjusted two grants that could be adjusted by virtue of results from Statistics Canada. In other words, we do one top-up grant for cost indexing and another one for socioeconomic status, so those would have been adjusted in any event. School boards would have expected that. Then we went to school boards and said: we'll take up to but not more than 11 per cent of your operating reserve and ask you to take it out of operating reserve, not out of the classroom. In other words, we all saved for a rainy day. We all saved for a purpose. Now is the time when we need to use some of those resources not to cancel projects but to stretch them out.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister. I guess the next obvious and final question is: of the boards that you took money from, when we return to balanced budgets, would you specifically look at returning money to those specific boards who contributed to this situation in the first place?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, what we are doing is having conversations with boards around the province and asking them to participate with us in the value review process so that decisions can be made, as we go forward, on a thoughtful, evidence-based, and value-driven basis, and we will be doing that with boards. There will be some

changes as a result of our discussions, undoubtedly, in funding formulas. I have to say that not all boards would agree that the funding formulas have been effective for all of them to date, so they're all thoughtfully working with us on developing the right funding model, recognizing that we're in difficult fiscal times but also recognizing that all of our decisions need to be based on evidence and value driven.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Government Accommodation Expenses

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Twelve million dollars has been spent on hotels and food by this government here in Alberta over the last two years. In a recession, with tens of thousands of Albertans losing their jobs, unfortunately, and many seeing their retirement savings dwindle, this government actually increased spending on hotels last year by over \$2 million. My first question is to the President of the Treasury Board. How can this government justify a \$2 million increase in spending on hotels in a recession year when at the same time the province is faced with a deficit of \$7 billion?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, you can take the downturn in the economy and the recession and you can sit there and pretend that you can't drive your way out of it or that you can't change. We've seen several things change in this government, and to get change right, you need to talk to the people that you're working with. The Minister of Education has gone through one of the most, we've heard, enlightening, stimulating, effective ways to talk about a new way of delivering education. Well, these people come from all over Alberta. The minister of health has been involved in working with health providers. We actually believe on this side that there is value in meeting with Albertans, sometimes where they live, sometimes in Edmonton or Calgary, and we'll continue to consult with Albertans so that the results we get going forward make us stronger than ever.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister. I can't understand why you can ask civil servants and nurses and others to work longer for less when you yourself won't tighten your belt. Why is this government telling ministries to cut programs for Albertans while it continues to spend millions of dollars at the Fairmont hotel, the Delta, Banff Park Lodge, the Hilton, the Crowne Plaza, and even the Fantasyland Hotel? That's just to name a few.

Mr. Snelgrove: I've got a hunch they've named a room after him in the Fantasyland Hotel. I won't know for sure.

Mr. Speaker, one of the pillars of going forward is to make sure that we not only sell our products around Canada and around the States but around the world. We are attracting businesses here to come and look. We are attracting governments and organizations to come and see what we're doing in Alberta and how we're doing it. It's important for us, the MLAs and ministers, to travel to where we're going to be doing business and understand these people. So, yes, we are investing and going around the world and developing markets for our products, and we're proud of it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thought the hon. minister's favourite hotel was the Hotel Macdonald.

My third question is to the minister of children's services. There was \$160,000 from children's services last year spent at the Radisson hotel and convention centre. Was that money, that 160 grand, spent for children in need, or was it spent for senior management?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will get that information to this member.

Thank you.

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

Reclaimed Waste Water

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs. A major greenhouse and gardening business in St. Albert is currently building a large, new, environmentally friendly operation adjacent to Big Lake provincial park. As one of their many environmental initiatives in designing their operation, they proposed to reuse grey water for landscaping and other environmentally friendly purposes. Apparently, they were denied a permit to use grey water because the Alberta building code requires that grey water must go directly into an approved sewage system. My question to the minister: does your department endorse the environmentally friendly concept of reusing grey water for other purposes?

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There is a growing interest in using grey water to help protect the environment. We don't have any regulations or codes in place to mitigate risks at this time, and I do want to emphasize that there are health and environmental risks. But we have established a group, a reclaimed water working group, that will develop regulations and standards and guidelines to facilitate safe use. Until this framework is established, reclaimed waste water cannot be used in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In view of the St. Albert greenhouse development and several other housing proposals for grey water systems in the city of St. Albert and I know in the county of Lac Ste. Anne and I'm sure there are other areas as well, is your department actually proposing amendments to the Alberta building code to recognize proactive environmental advances in construction technology?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is a good concept that could help protect Alberta's environment. The working group will explore the benefits and the risks. When the risks are mitigated, we will update the code. I just want to emphasize that the initiative very much supports the Alberta water for life strategy. Presently, Environment can issue a site-specific approval. More importantly, using reclaimed water for various purposes can help conserve the water resources of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental again to the Minister of Municipal Affairs: is your department prepared to initiate pilot projects to keep abreast of new environmental developments?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I think the issue of a pilot project would probably be more in the purview of the Ministry of Environment, so I'll answer the member's question.

Clearly, recycling of water is critical if we're going to be engaging in water conservation. I referred to that even earlier in question period today. Grey water is already used in some industrial applications. The current policy has a case-by-case analysis done, and that would be available to this particular development.

In the long term, though, Alberta Environment is working very closely with Municipal Affairs to review the policy, to develop a new policy so that we can have a much more robust system that will allow for these kinds of innovative projects to be approved on a more consistent basis and with far less hassle than would be the case today on a case-by-case basis. I applaud this particular development. I'm aware of it. I understand that it is truly leading edge. I'm hoping, whether it be a pilot project or any other way, that we can accommodate this project but, more importantly, we are able to develop that broader context for a policy in the future.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that was 84 questions and responses today.

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of an electronic petition received in my office over the summer months. This petition states:

We, the undersigned, request Alberta Health Services re-examine their decision to relocate Ambulance Dispatch Services to Calgary from Medicine Hat.

It is our opinion that moving Ambulance Dispatch Services to Calgary is detrimental to our region.

A total of 1,386 individuals signed their names to this petition.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a number of tablings from constituents today. The first is from Ian and May Dalziel, and they are writing with concerns around the condominium act and looking for legislation that could limit the percentage of rental units in a condominium.

The second tabling – actually, it does look to be a form letter – is from Lawrance Landry, also in my constituency, laying out concerns around French immersion funding.

The next is from Walter Sheluk, also a constituent – he managed to misspell my name, but that's okay – who is very unhappy with the direction of the current Alberta government in “attacking the citizens of Alberta who are ill” and is critiquing Dr. Duckett's performance.

Finally, from Anthony Falls, also a constituent. He makes the point that living downtown, he can “see on a daily basis what happens to people who can get the help they need.” He's referring specifically to Alberta Hospital Edmonton and asking that it be redeveloped.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have four tablings today. The first tabling I have is a letter that I received from the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness regarding the revised drug plan for seniors, and certainly his response is, as usual, interesting.

The second tabling I have is copies of a petition that was organized by Dorothy Black, and it was presented to our constituency office on October 16, 2009. It is from citizens across the province petitioning the Legislative Assembly to vote against Bill 50.

My third tabling is the accommodation expenses from the government of Alberta blue book for the year ended March 31, 2008, and the blue book for the year ended March 31, 2009. It's prepared by the Alberta Liberal caucus. I would think the Public Affairs Bureau will be checking my math, and they're welcome to do that, Mr. Speaker.

My last tabling is the accommodation expenses from the government of Alberta blue book for the year ended March 31, 2008, and for the blue book for the year ended March 31, 2009. The totals are there for everyone to see. This is regarding my questions earlier in question period.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling today. It's on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition. In his question today he referred to photographs, so I am tabling copies of photographs. They are from the Westmount influenza clinic yesterday, and they show all kinds of unmanned vaccination stations despite the crowds of people in the clinic.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mason: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of the executive summary of a report referred to today by my colleague prepared for the government of Saskatchewan entitled Future of Uranium Public Consultation Process. The report was delivered on September 15, 2009. It concluded that "the overwhelming response to this public consultation was that nuclear power generation should not be a choice for Saskatchewan."

Thank you.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk: for the hon. Ms Evans, Minister of Finance and Enterprise, the ATB Financial 2009 annual report and pursuant to the Securities Act the Alberta Securities Commission 2009 annual report.

Orders of the Day

Government Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and Enterprise.

Alberta Capital Bonds

16. Ms Evans moved:

Be it resolved that the Assembly approve in general the issue of Alberta capital bonds by the government in support of the development of public infrastructure projects and facilities.

Ms Evans: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to respond to this motion, and I want to assure you that I'll be listening intently to the ideas of my colleagues here in the Assembly as we work through the motion. The fact that we are having this discussion is due to the visionary leadership of our Premier as he unveiled his plan, The Way Forward, to Albertans in his address to the province on October 14.

Alberta is a beacon of hope and a magnet for international investment. Albertans have told us that they, too, are looking for a way to proudly invest in our province. A retail savings bond program targeted at capital infrastructure projects would provide Albertans with the opportunity to invest in a secure financial instrument and to participate very directly in building an even better quality of life for Albertans. That's why we're looking forward to offering Alberta capital bonds as part of our borrowing strategy. Alberta capital bonds are a retail bond program that would give individual Albertans an opportunity to invest in building needed infrastructure.

2:50

Judging from the volume of calls, letters, and e-mails that both my office and our department have been receiving, interest in buying Alberta capital bonds once again is high. Just to be clear, a bond is simply the legal instrument; that is, it is the promise to pay the government's issue when borrowing from multiple investors as opposed to a loan from a bank or another single third party.

There are several points around the bonds program where we are seeking advice through debate on this motion. The first point relates to the question of the type of bond or bonds that should be offered. There are a variety of types of bonds that could be offered for sale to Albertans, two of which are quite common and have been issued by the province in the past. These include conventional bonds, which pay a fixed rate of interest over the life of the bond, and variable-rate bonds, which pay an interest rate that is reset once or twice yearly to reflect movements in interest rates over time. I would suggest that offering three-year fixed-rate and five-year variable-rate bonds would be a viable option for the Alberta capital bonds program.

One of the other questions around the program deals with who should be able to buy Alberta capital bonds. In line with their name, a valid option would be for them to be sold only in Alberta and only to Albertans. What better way for Albertans to invest in their province and support needed infrastructure?

Another issue around bonds would be what the minimum and maximum amounts should be for purchase. In the past we've gone with a hundred dollar minimum, which I believe would be appropriate again. This would allow Albertans with even modest means to become involved. In order to keep the bond program focused on individual Albertans, there needs to be a maximum amount set for purchase after a full discussion here on this motion. In our borrowing we need to find the balance between opportunities for larger investors to get involved as well as opportunities for individual Albertans to take part. It is important to provide opportunity for individual Albertans of varying capacity to invest. I believe that a reasonable maximum amount for Alberta capital bonds gives the citizens of this province their chance to take part.

One of the questions we have been getting around these bonds is if Alberta capital bonds will be RRSP eligible. Our proposed selling period, next February, is during RRSP season, so I see this as an opportunity for another level of encouragement for Albertans to get involved in the Alberta capital bonds program.

We've also been asked where people can buy their Alberta capital bonds. As with our previous bond issues Alberta capital bonds would be available across the province at financial institutions such

as banks, credit unions, at ATB Financial branches, and also through investment dealers. The most frequent question we're getting from Albertans is: what kind of interest rate will they offer? The interest rate will have to be determined at a date closer to when sales start. We don't want to upset the investment market or increase our debt service costs any more than necessary, so the rate should be close to Alberta's market rates at the time the bonds go on sale.

Before I conclude, let me please remind you that the original capital bonds were first issued in the spring of 1987, with the last bond issue in 1997. The 1997 issue of these bonds raised \$206 million to help pay for infrastructure projects and to help offset budget deficits. I want to reiterate that our new issue of Alberta capital bonds will give Albertans the opportunity to invest in this great province while supporting capital infrastructure projects such as roads, highways, schools, hospitals, and bridges. It is an exciting moment for Albertans, with their individual aspirations and dreams of a better financial future, to have their chance to take an active role by investing in their province in the form of an Alberta capital bond.

I look forward to the discussion and hearing from all members of the Assembly as to what their advice would be and encourage all members to participate in this important discussion. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, and then I will recognize the hon. President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and participate in the debate this afternoon on Government Motion 16, Alberta capital bonds. I listened to the hon. minister with considerable interest. She is talking, of course, about a bond process that this province has used before. She correctly states that Alberta first introduced Alberta capital bonds in 1987. The name was changed less than a decade later. The bonds were originally – originally – used to pay for capital projects and to offset budget deficits.

Now, we have to be very careful here. We realize, to our astonishment, that we now have a \$7 billion deficit. If we look at the consolidated financial statements from last year and read the fine print, there's a \$2.8 billion deficit from that year as well. The deficit is growing, the sustainability fund is, unfortunately, shrinking, so we have to be very very careful here. I'm not saying that this is not a good idea, but I'm certainly urging that this Assembly, in light of this government's fiscal track record, proceed with caution, Mr. Speaker, on this matter.

I would remind the House that the government – and it was listed in the 2009-10 budget – has already borrowed \$1.1 billion by issuing bonds on the capital markets. Now, any additional issuance of bonds to the public would go above and beyond that amount that was quoted in last spring's budget. These bonds would go towards capital spending. At this time be mindful that we were talking a little bit earlier about bonds in the past being used to fund deficits. If we were to use this money for financing of the three-year, \$23 billion capital plan, that would be noteworthy. If one is to look at the annual report of the province of Alberta, you can see where last year, 2008-09, the total capital plan anticipated was \$8.7 billion dollars, but the actual amount spent in various places, whether it's on the highways or municipal infrastructure, postsecondary facilities, schools, hospitals, was \$7.5 billion dollars. There was an unallocated amount of \$1.1 billion.

We have some of the highest per capita spending in the country on capital projects. The Premier himself said in his televised address here two weeks ago that in some cases it was up to a 40 per cent saving. Contractors, like the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster – he used to be a contractor. I'm sure the hon.

member had a very sharp pencil and could give a good price on a project in the oil patch. If any gentleman in this House would know that now is the time to see if we can get some of these contractors to sharpen their pencils, it would be him. I was surprised to hear the Premier say that there could be savings of up to 40 per cent, so perhaps it's time to stretch out this \$23 billion dollar, three-year capital plan into a longer period of time to see if we can realize some significant savings like the Premier was talking about. So that would be one reason why we certainly should be proceeding cautiously with this debt.

The second issue, of course, is the fact that we already have the Alberta Capital Finance Authority, where municipalities can use the government's very good, to date, credit rating to borrow money for capital projects. Certainly, I see that as an item that should continue. If we look at the debt now from Alberta Capital Finance Authority and if we look at the annual report from the province, we will see that between 2008-09 there was a \$1 billion dollar increase in loans and advances made under the authority of the Alberta Capital Finance Authority Act.

We also need to point out, before we go into further debt, the obligations under public-private partnerships, the famous 3Ps. Now, if we look again and compare 2008 and 2009, we see that 2008 was restated. It was roughly \$1.6 billion, but it skyrocketed up to \$4.7 billion in 2009. So, you know, we can call it an obligation, but in reality it's a debt. At some point we're going to have to pay this money.

3:00

When we look at what's going on and we look at the money that we have available in the stability fund, I would again, please, caution all members of the House that perhaps these bonds are a very good idea, but we have to put limits on these bonds. I am not convinced that this government can manage our money. I'm sorry; you just don't have the track record.

If we are to proceed with this – if we are to proceed with this – I would like to ask the hon. minister of finance to consider that if these bonds are for sale only in Alberta and can only be purchased by Albertans, the capital projects that they are to finance, perhaps we can let some good Alberta contractors through an open and fair bid process get some of the work that these projects would finance. I'm getting calls in our constituency office from people who are driving by the ring road projects. They see the sign, and they want to know who Flatiron Construction is, Mr. Speaker. Of course, we all know Flatiron is from Denver, Colorado. There are other outfits building 3P schools that I think are from Guernsey island or somewhere like this. But I think we should also consider, if we're going to proceed with this plan, making sure that Alberta companies, if they're qualified and have sharp pencils, can get the work. I don't think we should be considered unreasonable if we were to stick up for a few of the Alberta contractors in these difficult economic times.

I know we have an infrastructure backlog in this province, but I would like to note, Mr. Speaker, two of the departments that are responsible for a lot of the infrastructure spending or the funding, the capital projects in this government: Infrastructure and Transportation. Now, in Infrastructure last year there was an amount – and perhaps the President of the Treasury Board can tell me – of \$1.5 billion that was transferred at the end of the budget year into, I believe, the stability fund. Did that come from savings in capital projects that were deferred or cancelled in the Department of Transportation or in the Department of Infrastructure?

We think there is a shortage of monies. Certainly, there appears to be whenever we look at the \$7 billion deficit. But in the Department of Transportation last year there was an unexpended amount of

half a billion dollars. A lot of it came from natural gas rebates, but there were other interesting projects that were either cancelled or used less money. If this money is part of that \$1.5 billion, it would be reasonable, in this hon. member's opinion, that perhaps we have money set aside or deferred for capital projects that the House or, certainly, this member is not aware of. I would like to have that clarified before we go any further on this debate on the Alberta bonds.

Also, in municipal support in the Department of Transportation there's the municipal infrastructure program, the Alberta cities transportation partnerships, the federal gas tax fund, the federal public transit trust, the Canada-Alberta municipal rural infrastructure fund. All these funds had unexpended amounts, and I would like to know: where is this money now? It obviously wasn't spent last year. There seems to be a panic on behalf of this government to raise additional funds.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would just again like to remind the House that there are a number of questions here that, hopefully, will be asked, but we do have a \$7 billion deficit anticipated this year. We know the results from last year. We know from some of the individual items in the respective departments that there was money unspent on capital last year. Why is it necessary to borrow more? We've already borrowed to our limit that was anticipated in the budget.

These are questions that I think should be answered before we vote on Motion 16. It certainly would be interesting to see how many Albertans would be willing to step up and buy bonds around RRSP time. Hopefully, if there is significant investment, the maximum benefit to Albertans through the construction of capital projects would proceed, and it would proceed in a timely fashion and also with a price tag that certainly is reasonable. If at this time I could have those questions answered through the course of the debate, I would appreciate it.

Again, there need to be measures of control placed on these capital bonds. Without a cap, I believe, or a limited time frame to issue the bonds, there's no certainty that this government will show fiscal restraint. I know there was fiscal restraint shown in Transportation and Infrastructure for whatever reason last year, and if I could have that explained to me, I would be very grateful.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we'll now proceed to hear from the President of the Treasury Board, then the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, and then the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to take the opportunity today to probably stay a little bit away from numbers and statistics because I think this concept of the art of the possibility here, what we can do with Albertans and what Albertans can do with their money to contribute to making the province they've chosen to live in a better place to be, is the question.

We are in a tremendously solid financial position compared to just about anywhere else, and we have started on a very aggressive program of building the infrastructure we need. All the while it begs the question: where is the money coming from that we spend? It comes from Albertans or industry that works in Alberta. And what are we doing with it? Well, we're providing the operational dollars for the different programs, and we're addressing their needs. We're building their roads. We're building their schools, their hospitals, and whatnot.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

It's a subject that the Premier has talked about for many years, the opportunity to allow Albertans, to encourage Albertans to invest in this infrastructure. It probably became more urgent with us witnessing a global meltdown that robbed many people, many Albertans of their cash, their investments. In many ways, Mr. Speaker, it robbed them of their hope and of their dreams for a comfortable retirement, and that's really unfortunate. We look at Alberta as a place where we can provide what many people would want, and that is certainty and stability, and have the bonus of helping to create an even more solid economy that they can be a part of.

I know a lot of the talk around the bonds has been around the tremendous comfort that seniors would have, knowing that their investments were invested in the Alberta government, in infrastructure in the Alberta government with a fair rate of return. But I would say that the best way, probably the most sure way, to make sure that you have stability for seniors, Mr. Speaker, is to have opportunity for youth. I think young Albertans will be a large class of the people that will want to invest in these bonds.

3:10

Our priorities may change as we go through life. As a young businessperson I may be more interested in investing in the roads or the other infrastructure that I see as the economic enablers. As I start to grow older and start to raise a family, I may think that I would like to invest a little in schools and in health care facilities because that's where my interest is. When I'm starting to see a lifetime of return from investing into these bonds, I'll realize that I am building that opportunity that I want as a senior in this province. As I get older, I may look for the opportunity to invest in bonds that build the seniors' facilities that we're actively building right now and different kinds of health care facilities.

So I think: what better form of direct democracy than allowing people to invest their money, to put their money where their mouth is? If they would like to invest in these bonds, then they can. Certainly, there'll be no pressure other than knowing that they have a place to put some money that's going to benefit them, maybe their parents, certainly their children, and overall the economy of Alberta.

So when we talk about the bonds, I see this as the start of a new way of doing business in Alberta. This isn't a result of the economic meltdown. We are one province that can proceed with our capital plan. We've set aside billions of dollars in our sustainability fund to be able to assure the building sector and Albertans that we are going to be able to continue to complete our capital plan.

The hon. member mentioned P3s. There's no question that the P3 opportunities have many, many different benefits that have been talked about in here. But one of the detractions is that much of the foreign capital that comes with it comes from out of the province. I believe, Mr. Speaker, that where possible we need to allow Albertans and the investment community in Alberta to invest. I, for one, think there are more opportunities than just the bond.

It goes back to the unfunded pension liability we picked up from the teachers. I believe – and I have talked with many teachers that would agree – that if we filled the shortfall in that unfunded pension plan with assets that provide a return, the teachers then have an opportunity to invest in schools that benefit our children. We have an opportunity as a government to accelerate our building programs around schools. It's a win-win. I think the care that people take with things they own or have a share in is greater, and I think that when the mindset becomes quite clear that it's Albertans owning Alberta's infrastructure, we'll all take a little more pride in how we deal with it. Certainly, the opportunity that we will be able to benefit from in having more available cash is true.

Now, I absolutely agree with the minister and the hon. member that there needs to be a balance in how much money we would attract, how much we can invest. We have to maintain the very practical, sensible approach of ensuring that we're building what we need where we need it, that we're building facilities that we have the staffing for, that fit into the existing capital plan. I don't think that it would be a real stretch, Mr. Speaker, to know that people would certainly be even more comfortable as we follow a capital plan.

The world has changed with being more innovative. I would certainly not want to use the banking community as being innovative in a good way because what we saw there were ways to take money from people with no accountability. I think that the last couple of years have shown people that if you can invest where you know, with people you can trust, they'll take that opportunity to do it.

I look at the capital plan that we're faced with, Mr. Speaker, and the \$20 billion and change that's in that plan. We don't look at it as a problem. We look at that as what we're building for the future. It's the ring roads. It's the hospitals. It's the schools. We know – and it's been stated many times in this room – that we're building far more per capita than anywhere else in Canada, and you know, that's okay with Albertans. Rarely do we get a call that says: "Hold my school," or "Stop my hospital project," or "Don't worry about my new road; I'm just fine."

Mr. Speaker, Albertans realize that a successful economy is knowledge based. It needs healthy communities in every sense of the word, and it needs the infrastructure to allow business to thrive, and they pay the bills for what we're trying to do for those who can't. So I think we have to accept that normal doesn't live here like it used to and that the opportunity we've got now – and I would certainly disagree with the hon. member about our history of finances. Albertans have asked for this repeatedly. The Premier made it, actually, one of his leadership mandates when he started, to give Albertans the opportunity to invest in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, I know that there are a lot of details that will be worked out around who sells them, the rate of return. Obviously, we'll use prudent money management when we work on that. I for one would like to have the opportunity when I'm no longer in this Legislature to invest in these bonds for the simple fact that I have the confidence that it'll be there, that it'll pay a fair return, and I think many Albertans are in the same frame of mind that they would love to have the opportunity to invest in this province we all live in.

I look forward to the debate. I know that we can come up with challenges to it. Fair. I also know that we have the staff and we have the vision to put together the appropriate amount of bond issuing. I think that as this develops, Mr. Speaker, it will develop into one where it can be accessed through the municipal borrowing process and other entities that you may not want to directly get in the bond business but certainly can benefit from the wealth that Albertans have accumulated and want to reinvest in Alberta.

So this, Mr. Speaker, is really simple. It's about letting Albertans reinvest or invest in Alberta. It's what we ought to do. I look forward to the discussion. It certainly opens up the art of possibility, that lives here in Alberta more than anywhere else I've ever been.

Thank you for this opportunity.

The Deputy Speaker: There are five minutes for comments or questions if any member wishes to. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Sure. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the President of the Treasury Board. I actually think this is an interesting idea. One of my concerns, however, is that there will be kind of a menu choice, if I understood correctly. My first question. Maybe I didn't

understand correctly, but I got the impression that people investing in these bonds might be able to decide: does it go to the local hospital in Lloydminster, or does it go to expanding highway 2 or to a new skating rink somewhere else? I'm going to express right here that I'm uneasy with that because it seems to me that then our capital program becomes a bit of a popularity contest rather than necessarily investing in what's needed. Are sewers going to be a popular item for capital bonds when they're up against competition for a seniors' lodge or a new arena? I'm wondering if the President of the Treasury Board has any information or views on just having people buy the capital bonds in general as opposed to having them check off specific projects.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, hon. member and Mr. Speaker. I thought I was clear when I said that we have a capital plan in place and that we have the prioritized projects in the capital plan.

As to the bonds, originally we talked about the bonds being more appropriately at this time for seniors' facilities, obviously facilities that are prioritized already in our capital plan. I agree: I don't think we want to get in a position where a wealthy community or wealthy groups start to dictate our capital plan. I agree with you. If I left that impression, I didn't mean to. My intention is that you will put together a priority plan that fits our capital plan, that has all the checks and balances in the two, you know, whether it's staffing, appropriateness, and you would work that out.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.
3:20

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I found the hon. minister's speech informative and quite interesting. Now, you mentioned that one of the Premier's campaign promises was a similar policy to this. The Premier also made a campaign policy to increase the amount of bitumen that was upgraded to synthetic crude oil in this province. Given that the government is now willing to take bitumen in kind as a royalty, could these bonds be used to finance a merchant bitumen upgrader in this province?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, these bonds are very specifically targeted for public infrastructure. While I certainly applaud and agree with our ministers of Finance and Energy that we need to work on the BRIK policy and how that can move forward, it's about involving business. It's about using what we have in Alberta to get upgraders or upgrader/refineries or whatever mix it is to come here and to help us achieve the policy objectives of the Alberta government. But raising capital for business ventures is clearly, clearly outside the issue that we're talking about here, bonds for public infrastructure.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. members?

Seeing none, then the chair shall recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and discuss the motion that is before the House today, which is the issuance of Alberta capital bonds by the government in support of the development of public infrastructure projects and facilities.

As was indicated earlier, Alberta has a bit of a history doing this. It first began introducing Alberta capital bonds back in 1987, and

they were later changed to the Alberta savings certificates in 1996. Around 1997, when our finances turned and things began to get a little bit better for the province, these methods of financing Alberta's, I guess to use a new terminology, way forward came to an end at that time as Alberta coffers became, once again, filled with royalty revenues from the oil and gas industry. We began again to then spend those for our development, our projects, our infrastructure, our horse racing, whatever you want to call it that this government spent on over the last number of years.

Now, when we find ourselves here in 2009, again with the money tree not pumping quite, I guess, literally, like it was at one time, we again have gone back to capital bonds to try and raise revenue for the government, which is essentially debt. You know, that is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, we possibly could be using some of these funds right now to go to the marketplace and to raise money, and it may be a good time to do that. Interest rates are relatively low. If you go to a private investor and they were given the opportunity of saying, "Well, we'll raise capital and only charge you 2 per cent, 2.5 per cent interest on this money for the next 10 years," a lot of people would say, "Hey, that's a heck of a good deal," especially if you can afford the payments. Alberta appears to be in that situation.

Having said that, there were also some comments brought up by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar which resonated very true with me. This government had, at least by many accounts, including by opposition members of this House, pretty extensive spending habits over the course of the last little while, whether these have been legacy projects or program spending or whatever was the flavour of the day. With that history in mind and with Alberta's boom-and-bust culture and our history of having to go into debt and then get out of debt at other times by resorting to the money tree in the backyard, the oil and gas industry, those comments resonated with me; I mean, particularly those.

We already have a \$23 billion capital plan that's out there that is fairly extensive, fairly detailed, and fairly aggressive compared to other jurisdictions. With the slowdown in the economy that \$23 billion may be more than enough to get us by, to increase the public infrastructure space that is necessary. If we can always, hopefully, build the schools and the hospitals that people need with that money, it's better than going into debt even further than we appear to be going, and hopefully that won't be necessary.

Given those concerns, I would say that we can't just give a blank cheque to how many government bonds we're going to issue, or we could be in trouble here. I think it is necessary that, as the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar said, we should put some limits, some constraints on how many times we will go to the marketplace in the next little while to raise funds. I think that would be prudent. It would allow us, once we reach that limit, if that limit ever arrives, to then come back to this House to discuss whether we need any more money. At that time it may well be necessary, but I don't think that putting in that extra step of coming back to the House and discussing whether more money is necessary to pay for whatever Albertans need or what we deem necessary is a bad thing. It's just another opportunity to keep Albertans apprised of what is going on with government expenditures, and it would allow us to then look at the issue more closely and take a second look at whether the finances are truly necessary.

Those things being said, as long as there is a recognition that although this may be an okay time to be going to the marketplace for funds and that, yes, there is an argument that we're giving Albertans a nice way to invest in their future, well, yeah. Sure. Why not? We can paint it up that way, but at the end of the day this is still debt.

You know, the average Albertan has many ways to invest in the marketplace to get capital bonds, other places besides the Alberta government. They can walk down to their local Alberta Treasury Branches and talk to the teller, and she'll direct them to the financial department. They'll say, "You want some bonds; well, here's a list of things we can get you into" or "Here's a group of mutual funds where you can get bonds that average you back probably more money than we're going to pay out on this bond issue over time." Let's not fool ourselves that we're doing this great service for the Alberta people here by issuing these bonds. Hopefully, they're picked up, hopefully they'll provide us with a little bit of comfort room and hopefully an ability to do good things for Albertans. But let's remember that this is debt that Albertans and Alberta's future generations will have to pay back, and we should always be cognizant of that going forward.

It's been a privilege to get up here and speak to this. Again, hey, I'm hoping this works out. I'm hoping we put this money to good use. But at the same time I urge caution in the approach we're taking right now.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: We have five minutes for comments, questions.

Seeing none, the chair now shall recognize the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise and speak to Government Motion 16, which provides for the availability and the sale of government savings bonds for all Albertans, or Alberta capital bonds, or Alberta savings bonds. Savings bonds would provide Albertans with a safe and secure investment tool which would be fully backed by the government of Alberta. I've been in favour of savings bonds. The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* mentioned just a moment ago about other areas going to banks or whatever to look at the list of bonds that are available. I have to admit that I've done that, and I consider them a very secure instrument. Really, once purchased, they may be redeemed at a later date, at which point the government would pay back the principal and any interest accrued.

3:30

Mr. Speaker, savings bonds are a key element to achieving the goals of *The Way Forward*, our Premier's bold vision of an Alberta that emerges from the economic recession stronger than ever. It's comprised of four elements. First, this government will take firm action to deal with the fiscal challenges we face. Second, we'll draw upon the savings we wisely invested in the boom years. Third, we'll continue to invest in public infrastructure to get value for the taxpayer, to support jobs, and to prepare for a return to economic growth. Fourth, we'll make sure that our energy and other industries are competitive and attract the investment we need to develop Alberta's resources.

Mr. Speaker, savings bonds will provide several benefits and opportunities for Albertans. First, this would be an excellent saving tool for Albertans. Backed by Alberta's triple-A credit rating thanks to our record of strong fiscal management, they will offer an exceptional rate of return. Second, the government of Alberta will invest the funds collected from the sale of these bonds into critical infrastructure projects to help maintain our communities. Bondholders will be able to know exactly what projects they're helping to build. It could be anything from improving our transportation network, including new roads and highways, to schools and medical facilities. As an investment tool savings bonds would offer a more competitive rate of return than a regular savings account from any bank.

While banks may attach certain conditions to their accounts, Alberta savings bonds will offer maximum flexibility for investors. No matter what age, Alberta bonds make an ideal savings solution. For young Albertans a savings bond could grow substantially over a period of time, providing a useful tool for a variety of future needs. For young adults savings bonds could provide an additional tool to save hard-earned money. Moreover, young adults could use their hard-earned savings for postsecondary education, for purchasing a home or a vehicle.

For young families savings bonds are a way for parents to invest in their province's and children's future. The savings bonds that a young couple purchases may end up helping to fund the construction of a new school that will one day educate their child or the hospital that may help deliver a future child of theirs into the world. A young couple may wish to purchase bonds to save for their children's postsecondary education. In the meantime, Mr. Speaker, the government may choose to use the funds gathered from the sale of these bonds to help finance improvements to our postsecondary institutions such as new lecture halls or more student spaces.

The bonds that the couple purchases will accrue interest over 18 or more years until they're withdrawn for the child's postsecondary education. It's important to note that families who purchase capital bonds could also withdraw their investment for other critical needs. These could include a down payment for a new car, a home, or home renovations.

Mr. Speaker, savings bonds would also benefit those who have given so much to build this province, our senior citizens. For seniors a savings bond is yet another way to contribute to building a stronger Alberta. Bonds purchased today by seniors may be used to help fund major projects in their communities. They can take great satisfaction in knowing exactly which projects their bonds helped to fund. As savings bonds will provide a favourable rate of return, they will provide an attractive means to save their hard-earned money. In addition, they will also be an ideal solution for individuals or families who wish to diversify their savings portfolio.

Mr. Speaker, the rate of return on savings bonds will, I hope, compare quite favourably to a savings account individuals can open at their bank. Furthermore, banks generally charge a fee to maintain a savings account, and depending on the account, the bank may require a fee for withdrawals from that account.

Another popular option for savings is a tax-free savings account, a flexible, registered, general-purpose savings account which was introduced by the federal government on January 2, 2009. These savings accounts permit Canadians to contribute up to \$5,000 annually as well as withdraw any amount at any time tax free. Similarly, it's my hope that the government permits Albertans to purchase and withdraw savings bonds tax free as well.

Mr. Speaker, this government has a bold plan that will help Alberta emerge from this economic recession stronger than ever. I believe that savings bonds will strengthen Albertans by providing an exceptional savings option that will offer a favourable rate of return. With record-low interest rates and construction costs savings bonds purchased by Albertans will help to fund critical infrastructure projects for an exceptional value.

I strongly believe that this motion speaks to the values that define us as Albertans, working together to build a stronger province for future generations. For these reasons I'm very proud to stand in support of Motion 16 and strongly urge my colleagues from both sides of this House to support it as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Five minutes for questions. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that. I have a number of questions for the hon. member. The hon. member in his speech indicated that the government had a record of I believe it was strong fiscal management if I heard him correctly. I would like to ask the hon. member: does he consider the track record in the last year with Alberta Health Services – we went from nine regional health authorities. We fired them, and we created this one streamlined system that was supposed to control costs and improve service, and in reality what has happened is that it's over a billion dollars in deficit, people are being laid off, and facilities are being downgraded. Does the hon. member consider that strong fiscal management?

Mr. Mitzel: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's an interesting question. You talk about strong fiscal management. You talk about a point that the hon. member has raised. Now, I think the one thing that the hon. member has not raised is the fact that this is included in the 20-year plan, Vision 2020, with regard to health services. I think that if you looked at the whole thing and took it as a whole, you'd probably see how it fits. Now, look at all the rest of the management we've got. You look at all the money that has been saved. The sustainability fund: that's up to \$17 billion. If you look at all of these other ones and put those all together, I would have to say that there is a track record of strong fiscal management.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again specific to Alberta Health Services, does the hon. member think that providing a \$22,000-a-month pension to the CEO of the Calgary health region after eight years' service and giving that individual 26 or 28 years of pensionable service for eight years' work and having the taxpayers make the entire 100 per cent contribution to that \$22,000-a-month pension is strong fiscal management?

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

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, you can take any figures you like. You can start at a very high level, and you can drill down to a very, very low level. What you do when you go down to the low level is you get involved in micromanaging the nitty-gritty. In fact, what we're talking about with the Alberta savings bonds is something at a 30,000-foot level that looks at all of Alberta. There are instances that have to be looked at and worked with in all departments, whether it's agriculture or oil and gas or anything else, and you've picked one item and looked at that and asked how it fits with strong fiscal management. You look at that, and you'll find that we're talking from a very, very high level here on all of this.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. If we're talking about micromanaging the nitty-gritty, I would caution the hon. member that if you look after the dimes and nickels, the dollars will look after themselves. How could you explain this example – giving after only nine months of service to an individual who was the former deputy minister of health, Paddy Meade, a quarter of a million dollars bonus for nine months' work when she was let go – as a sign of strong fiscal management?

3:40

An Hon. Member: Relevance.

Mr. MacDonald: That's relevant. Of course it is, hon. member.

Mr. Mitzel: Mr. Speaker, I think that the contract arrangements that were possibly made with the individual he talks about and Alberta Health Services are something that I'm not privy to, nor do I have a part in that. I think we work with contracts. As well, Alberta Health Services has a job to do, and they're working through that.

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, I think I now understand why the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar hasn't got two dimes to rub together.

I wonder if I could ask the hon. member: rather than the sniping or whatever you might call it that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has been doing, I wonder if that member has heard one constructive suggestion from the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar as to how to move forward and improve a very strong record of sound fiscal management. One constructive suggestion.

Mr. Mitzel: Mr. Speaker, on reflection, no.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member wish to use the five minutes?

Seeing none, the chair now shall recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and offer my support for the government motion to issue Alberta savings bonds. The effects of the current economic recession have been felt across the world, and many Albertans have many stories that exemplify the effects of the challenging times they face. These have been trying times for Albertans and our province. However, we have reason to be optimistic for our province has positioned itself to emerge from this recession with a stronger economy and with stronger public services.

Albertans are known, Mr. Speaker, for their hard work, for their dedication to their families, and for the pride they have in their communities and province. In 2003 with the help of hard-working Albertans our government paid off the provincial debt. This was a momentous feat that our government and our citizens should take pride in. After all, it serves as one example of contributing to Alberta's legacy. Also, since 2003 our government saved a percentage of our revenue while still providing Albertans with effective and efficient public services. After paying off the provincial debt, we have amassed \$25 billion in savings: \$8 billion in the heritage savings trust fund and \$17 billion in the sustainability fund.

Mr. Speaker, our government had the strategic foresight to realize that the prosperity and growth which our economy witnessed during these good years would be interrupted at some point down the road. The current global recession and the global financial crisis had an impact on government revenue. However, the sustainability fund was intended for economic times like the one we are currently facing. With the heritage trust fund, the sustainability fund, and the hard-working citizens of our province we have the potential in the near future to return to the days of growth and prosperity. Our government cares about people and continues to position and strengthen Alberta to emerge from the recession with a stronger economy. One way in which we can take strides towards recapturing the growth and prosperity in our economy is by reintroducing Alberta savings bonds.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta has achieved the highest credit rating possible. In fact, Alberta has the highest credit rating of any province in Canada. Because of our massive savings our province has received a triple-A credit rating. The ratings system identifies the level of security that an investor has in their investment. Few organizations are able to achieve a triple-A rating. Our triple-A

credit rating is the highest rating available and is based on our past savings initiatives and our province's superior economic performance. Alberta savings bonds would provide Albertans with a convenient and secure savings platform.

Alberta savings bonds will also provide peace of mind for the investor, knowing that a repayment of the initial purchase price and interest are guaranteed. A particularly attractive feature of Alberta savings bonds is that they are an investment in our province which can enable the opportunity for public service and infrastructure projects.

With the reintroduction of Alberta savings bonds, Mr. Speaker, many questions will be asked regarding specific conditions, including the maximum amount available to purchase and who would be eligible to buy Alberta savings bonds. First, Mr. Speaker, let me address the maximum amount available to purchase. The Alberta savings bonds will allow an individual to have the opportunity to diversify their investments in a secure and stable manner, and I am truly confident that our government will set an appropriate limit that will allow our government to control the amount of bonds sold with the opportunity to reassess the maximum amount available for purchase.

The second question, Mr. Speaker, is regarding who will be eligible to purchase Alberta savings bonds. Alberta savings bonds, for example, should be sold solely to Albertans to allow the citizens of our province to enjoy the benefits of our government's savings practices. The credit rating which our government has earned provides security to the investor and allows the investor to display their optimism and confidence in Alberta's future. The security which these bonds provide is a direct result of our government's savings and positive economic past. Thus, only Albertans should have the option to purchase savings bonds.

Furthermore, Albertans should know the specific projects that Alberta savings bonds will fund. The projects chosen should benefit all Albertans in order to make investing in Alberta savings bonds more attractive.

Mr. Speaker, our rising population – today we have approximately 50,000 people migrating into Alberta per year – has led to an increased demand for infrastructure projects. Not only are infrastructure projects needed for our increasing population; they create jobs and provide value for Alberta's taxpayers. Investing Alberta savings bonds in infrastructure projects is a step toward returning to sound economic growth and additional planning for Alberta's future. For example, Alberta's increasing population has meant more vehicles on our roads. Upgrades to our provincial highway network are necessary to allow for the efficient and safe transportation of people and goods throughout the province.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta capital bonds can be used to improve our provincial highway network and to provide value for our taxpayers. The Ministry of Infrastructure's three-year capital plan, for example, includes funding to complete two interchanges on highway 63 within Fort McMurray. The population growth that Fort McMurray and the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo have experienced over the past 10 years is staggering. Reports suggest that the population is expected to exceed 100,000 by the year 2012, which is just around the corner. Being home to one of the world's largest single deposits of oil, a commodity which is viable to the economic growth of our province, may require improvements in infrastructure to improve efficiency and keep up with the demands of an increasing population.

Although the details for the Alberta bonds are still in their early stages, I would like to highlight some of the current infrastructure projects going on and suggest that future projects like these may benefit from the funds generated by the Alberta bonds. Our

government has acknowledged the significance of the oil sands to our province's economy. Funds generated through capital bonds could in the future fund the completion of projects like the completion of the two interchanges on highway 63 within Fort McMurray. Projects like these are a major step in providing roads for future Albertans to enjoy.

Mr. Speaker, another project that is identified in the Ministry of Infrastructure's three-year plan is the continued twinning of highway 63 between Edmonton and Fort McMurray. This stretch of highway has experienced increased volume due to the rapid population growth around the oil sands. There will continue to be a need for improved and new infrastructure. To deal with this need, Alberta bonds could be used to mitigate future growth.

3:50

Our government has recognized that this stretch of highway 63 is vital for the efficient transportation of goods and services to and from Fort McMurray. By twinning this stretch of highway, we are increasing efficiency and improving the safety of this very important highway. The twinning of highway 63 is consistent with the government's commitment to provide connections between major urban centres and high-growth industrial areas.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that the money invested in our province through the purchase of Alberta savings bonds should be used to fund infrastructure projects such as these. This would improve the value of tax dollars provided to Albertans while improving efficiency, safety, and preparing our province for the population growth which we will experience in the coming years.

This population growth also brings the need for other public facilities such as schools. That is why this government has initiated building 14 new schools in the Edmonton and Calgary regions. Although some of these schools are being built through a public-private partnership, some will be delivered through the design-build approach, which is where the government finances the design and construction. Although these 14 schools are creating 12,700 more spaces for Alberta students, future projects that are similar to these schools, I believe, should be considered when investing the funds raised through the Alberta savings bonds. They are ensuring that our province is prepared for our population growth.

The third point of this government's economic recovery plan as outlined in *The Way Forward*, in fact, is to continue to invest in public infrastructure. The projects I just used as some examples of sound investments in our province's future: I wholeheartedly believe that they are the types of projects that will contribute to this province moving forward and its legacy for generations to come and making a strong recovery.

I am deeply interested in other members' discussions and continued advice from even my constituents of Edmonton-Decore and all Albertans regarding Alberta savings bonds, and I warmly welcome all the input. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: There are five minutes for questions and comments. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore mentioned in her remarks about the government's superior economic performance, and near the conclusion the hon. member provided examples of sound investments. My first question to the hon. member would be this: does the hon. member consider the \$45 million that was spent in achievement bonuses in the last fiscal year another example of a sound investment at a time when everyone else is being asked to work harder for less?

Mrs. Sarich: Mr. Speaker, I'm struggling regarding the relevance of the question to this particular subject.

Thank you.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Just to clarify for the hon. member, in your remarks you talked about the superior economic performance of the government, you elaborated, and in conclusion you provided examples of what you thought were sound investments. Again, my question is: do you consider the \$45 million that we spent in senior management achievement bonuses in the fiscal year 2008-09 an example of a sound investment? Yes or no.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to rise on a point of order, *Beauchesne* 459, relevance.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader on a point of order.

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore was talking about, and when she talked about sound financial management, I believe she was referring to \$25 billion worth of savings that have accumulated during surplus times and how those particular dollars were allocated. In fact, I recall her distinctly saying that \$8 billion of the \$25 billion went directly into the Alberta heritage savings trust fund, which is very good, sound economic planning, which is what she was talking about. A further \$17 billion was set aside into the sustainability fund, another example of good, sound, prudent planning. It is, in fact, as a result of that good, prudent planning that we now have a \$17 billion daily cash account upon which we can draw should the need be here, and the need is here. That all, of course, arose several years ago when we made the conscious and conscientious decision to in fact allocate those monies for rainy days such as is the case in Alberta today. As a result, I would ask your indulgence to call the member to order on the point of relevance because I think it was relevant whereas the comments he is making are totally irrelevant. I think he is inventing purposes to suit his own claims.

Mr. MacDonald: In response, Mr. Speaker, it's clear that I was the one that was paying attention to the hon. member's speech, not the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek. Now, it was clear, and the hon. member said it on a number of occasions. She provided examples of sound investments. It had nothing to do with sound financial planning or any of the other comments that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek has provided as examples. You're totally offside here. This is not a point of order. The hon. member talked about examples of sound investments. It had nothing to do with financial planning or anything else.

I'm sorry if the hon. member was busy working at his files and not paying keen attention like I was to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore's speech. I dare him to stand up and then accuse me of not being relevant when the hon. party whip over there got up before and was completely out of order, but the House chose to just ignore that. This is frivolous, and I think we should continue with the debate in the five-minute allocation that we have left. I would again ask the hon. member, if she can, to please answer the question. Yes or no.

The Deputy Speaker: I have to rule on this thing, this point of order raised here.

First of all, this is the five minutes for comments and questions – comments, which have a large latitude. I just want to rule that there is no point of order but also want to call on the hon. Member for Edmonton–Gold Bar to be narrow in your questions, to the point. Thank you.

Debate Continued

The Deputy Speaker: Do you still wish to answer the question, hon. Member for Edmonton–Decore?

Mrs. Sarich: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I still maintain that I'm struggling with the relevance of the question. I do believe the deputy House leader has highlighted the points that I emphasized in the time allocated, and I have nothing further to add on this subject. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: On my list here the chair shall now recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton–Mill Woods.

Mr. Benito: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to support the government's motion for this Assembly to approve in general the issue of Alberta capital bonds by the government in support of the development of public infrastructure projects and facilities. I'm also excited to rise today to speak to this government motion because I look forward to the potential benefits that it would bring to all Albertans.

Essentially, this motion would re-establish government of Alberta savings bonds. The savings bonds would be a safe and rewarding investment for all Albertans because they would guarantee a return while giving all Albertans the opportunity to purchase them. This motion is a worthwhile cause with endless potential benefits for this province, Mr. Speaker. The funds generated from these savings bonds could be invested in many ways. For instance, one way could be in Alberta's infrastructure as this investment would be advantageous for all Albertans and future generations to come. This is an exciting possibility because Albertans would pocket their dividends while watching their investment go towards infrastructure projects that benefit the province.

4:00

There are many reasons why some of these funds should go towards maintaining and expanding the province's infrastructure. After all, investing in our infrastructure provides multiple benefits to Albertans. First, as Alberta's population continues to grow, it is more important than ever that we continue to ensure that we have the infrastructure in place that will support this province's future growth.

The government is already aware of this, which is why we have allocated nearly \$7.2 billion for infrastructure projects this year as part of Alberta's 20-year capital plan. This three-year capital plan totals \$23.2 billion and provides significant investment in infrastructure such as health facilities, schools, postsecondary facilities, municipal infrastructure, highways, climate change initiatives, and regional water systems. On capital projects like this this government is spending double the per capita average of other provinces, which shows our serious commitment to Alberta's future. This also means that we are taking advantage of lower construction costs and increased availability of labour. This is a value-added strategy, Mr. Speaker.

The capital plan is an example of this government's foresight and long-term planning, which help to ensure a continued high standard of living for all Albertans. For instance, Albertans will benefit from

54 new and replacement schools across the province, which will accommodate more than 31,000 students. Money will also be invested in school infrastructure revitalization projects such as repairs, health and safety upgrades, mechanical system replacements, and energy efficiency improvements.

The capital plan funding will be evenly distributed as \$5.8 billion will be provided over the next three years for Alberta highways, \$5.6 billion for municipalities, and \$1.2 billion for postsecondary facilities. More specifically, this \$1.2 billion investment in postsecondary facilities will create spaces for more than 16,000 students in high-demand programs, and it includes funding for new facilities, additions to existing to existing institutions, and approximately \$328 million for infrastructure maintenance across the province.

Mr. Speaker, everyone benefits from our capital plan since nearly \$1.7 billion will be used for climate change initiatives such as supporting technologies that reduce greenhouse emissions and increase efficiency of energy use and production. This includes carbon capture and storage projects as well as initiatives through programs like the green transit incentive program, the climate change and emission management fund, and the Canada ecotrust for clean air and climate change.

Furthermore, Albertans will have access to more patient-focused services through capital funding in health care, with more than \$3 billion over three years for expansion projects, construction of new health facilities, health information systems, and vaccines. This funding will also relieve pressure on the acute-care system and emergency rooms by building a more robust outpatient and ambulatory care system.

Mr. Speaker, I can go on, but it is very clear that this government is committed to maintaining and building our infrastructure. With that being said, the government of Alberta savings bond could be another form of investment in ensuring that Alberta is well positioned for the future.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, public infrastructure projects help stimulate the economy – I would know that because I finished economics at the University of Alberta – which is another reason why the savings bonds have the potential to be extremely profitable for Albertans. After all, infrastructure projects create many jobs. In this way this government motion could be a vital component of the government's commitment to stimulate the economy and support employment. It is estimated that every \$1 billion invested in infrastructure spending supports 11,600 jobs across the economy, from engineering and construction to the retail and service sectors. In fact, capital planned spending this year is expected to support more than 80,000 jobs, Mr. Speaker. In this way the government of Alberta savings bonds would be going towards creating more jobs as an increase in infrastructure spending equates to more employment for Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, my third and final point is that by expanding our infrastructure network, the province would be continuing to ensure open access to trade, investment, and labour mobility within Alberta, between provinces, and with other countries. Investing in our highways supports the operation of Alberta's essential energy, forestry, and agriculture industries, all of which require safe and efficient transportation routes. In addition, developing ring roads, twinning highways, building interchanges, continuing construction of trade corridors, and pavement rehabilitation all help to ensure that our cities are accessible and free flowing. This ultimately ensures that our cities are attractive places to live, work, and invest. This, I believe, is the vision of our good Premier for this province.

Mr. Speaker, this government motion could support Alberta's interprovincial trade policy, which is to pursue free trade in goods, services, and investment and access for people between Alberta and the rest of Canada. It could help make certain that Alberta's industries are globally competitive and continue to attract investment to develop our resources. Investing a share of the savings bonds in infrastructure would be an example of an innovative way of raising funds without increasing taxes. This government motion has the potential to be another way for Albertans to voluntarily invest in programs that are very important to them. It is always good to have several methods of attracting investment. This government has made a commitment not to increase taxes. Therefore, other forms of generating investments which benefit all Albertans are a worthwhile venture.

Mr. Speaker, in the end, these savings bonds could help advance Alberta's economy by increasing trade, creating jobs, and ensuring that our province is ready for future growth. The government of Alberta savings bonds would not only be an investment in Albertans' futures but could also be an investment in the future of this province. I cannot think of a better investment. For these reasons I support this government motion for this Assembly to approve in general the issuing of Alberta capital bonds by the government in support of the development of public infrastructure projects and facilities.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: We have five minutes for comments or questions. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm wondering if the member who just spoke might have ideas of projects in his constituency that he might want to see funded through these capital bonds.

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

Mr. Benito: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A few days ago there was a fire hall that was opened in my constituency of Edmonton-Mill Woods. I'm very proud to say that this government really supports the infrastructure projects and facilities that would be needed in any community to meet the needs of our constituency membership. I think this is a good example: 5,200 calls were made to the emergency response team that serves the community in meeting their immediate needs. I'm very proud to say that this is really the essence of these capital bonds that this government is thinking of approving.

Thank you very much.

4:10

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

Dr. Taft: Well, thanks, Mr. Speaker. Correct me if I'm wrong. I think fire halls in Edmonton are actually municipal infrastructures. If I am correct in that, then my question to the member would be: is it the government's intention with these capital bonds to also finance municipal infrastructure?

Mr. Benito: Well, I think the intention of this government motion is very clear, Mr. Speaker. It is to support the infrastructure projects and facilities. We should not limit ourselves to the short-mindedness of anybody in this House. It can be anything that supports the government's initiative when it comes to infrastructure projects and facilities, and it is very broad. This is the reason why, you know, we are doing this motion as a broad concept at the same time.

The Deputy Speaker: Seeing no other members, the chair shall now recognize – in fact, I have a list here. I'll just name a few: the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, followed by the Minister of Seniors and . . .

Mr. Hehr: A question.

The Deputy Speaker: Oh, you have a question. All right. Sorry.

Mr. Hehr: I just have another question for the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. I believe that during his speech he was commenting something on stimulating the economy and economics at the University of A. I was just wondering if this is sort of a means by his government to undertake essentially debt to stimulate the economy, to play a role in the economy at the time when it's down. Was that what you were saying there?

Mr. Benito: Well, you know, I've been in business for more than 20 years. I'm involved in real estate development, selling of real estate, commercial, residential. I know; you know, I've seen it first-hand. Any development that any government will do in support of any infrastructure always will stimulate the economy. I could confirm that because of my experience, having an economics background, also, from the University of Alberta. I firmly believe that this government motion will really stimulate the economy, no doubt about that. Personally, for myself, I feel very strongly on this, and I'm a firm believer in this government motion.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I guess the follow-up question: would you consider yourself a Keynesian, then? You've taken these courses in the economy. Would you believe that governments do have a role to play, then, in economies when things are in the muck, shall we say, like they are now and through the issuance of bonds? That's what you're doing.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, if you wish to reply. [interjections]

Hon. members, if there are questions or comments, address them to the chair. Thank you.

I have a list here. I just want to read it out so that you gentlemen and ladies can be prepared: the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, followed by the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, the hon. members for Edmonton-Castle Downs, Edmonton-Ellerslie, Strathmore-Brooks, and the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Now the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's great to get into this debate. I guess that when this topic came up, I probably had more questions than answers. I think a lot of the time I'll spend today is putting out some ideas that a lot of constituents have asked me when they're hearing about these bond issues. Probably before my time, that I can recall anyways, Alberta capital bonds were used. Maybe some of the members opposite that have been around longer than I have could refresh my memory about what capital bonds were used for, but I think maybe the sky is the limit on this issue.

Maybe offering a bond right now could give a lot of people the surety that Albertans can invest in Alberta. You know, why should we always have to buy a Montreal bond or an Ontario bond or a Suncor bond? Why couldn't we buy an Alberta bond? Especially, I look back at the senior population and my constituents. You know, in the '80s, when the economy went bad, I remember my wife

coming home and saying: "What are we going to do? Our mortgage rate is going to go up to 20 per cent." I also remember that Sunday at my parents' house and my parents thinking: "Wow. Isn't this great? Twenty per cent." For the senior income it was pretty good, but for those of us that didn't have any money, not so good.

Well, the reverse has happened this time in the economy. Maybe this instrument could give our seniors that are getting a fraction of a point in their savings accounts in interest some surety for future income, but maybe it will also give them an opportunity to invest in the future for their children and their grandchildren and for generations forward. I know that our senior population has been there for us, and this will also give them another instrument to be there for Albertans.

I say that there's a Canadian savings bond instrument right now, so again, why not an Alberta savings bond? I know that my parents were very involved with buying Canadian savings bonds. They were proud to do that. They were proud to be Canadians, and they were proud to be Albertans. I think this will again inspire that proud-to-be-an-Albertan, proud-to-be-a-Canadian atmosphere. I think I'm feeling pretty good about this idea of a bond.

We heard some of the previous speakers talk about a preference for Albertans. Well, I know you have to be competitive out there in the market when you're issuing a bond, but maybe there is an instrument that our finance minister could consider when Albertans are purchasing an Alberta bond. Maybe we wouldn't have to pay Alberta income tax on the money generated by an Alberta bond. Why not? Why not have the preference that way, Mr. Speaker? I think the sky is the limit on this issue.

You know, the member opposite talked about municipalities: should they be part of this? Well, maybe they should be. In Whitecourt-St. Anne we have a foundation that's made up of all the municipalities, and they pool their resources for seniors' facilities. You know, right now when they want to build a seniors' facility, well, they get in line for the grants that, hopefully, they can access from different levels of government, but then they go to the regular institutions for lending. Well, maybe they should be able to line up at Alberta financial services somehow, maybe through a bond, maybe through the same instruments as municipalities can borrow from through their sources for an arena or a water pond or a sewage lagoon. Maybe foundations should be able to line up for this funding if this bond idea is successful.

Again, previous speakers talked about preference for Albertans. Well, I see this as larger than Albertans investing in infrastructure, in multiple levels of capital expenditures. I'm thinking that this should be an RRSP-deductible issue. We'll have to get the federal government involved if it's going to be RRSP. We'll need to have some discussions with our federal counterparts because what better instrument to invest into than a bond that's backed by a government with the credit rating that we have? Why not use that? That's an asset. I think it's an underused asset. Why not get out there and promote that asset? Yeah, I think the minister should have a meeting with her federal counterparts and talk about an RRSP. [interjections] You know, I can't hear. I'll put my earpiece in. Afterwards you can question me all you want, but I can't hear this stuff. If there are smart aleck remarks coming about my hearing, it had better come to you, not through the background here because I can't hear that stuff, okay?

4:20

Mr. Speaker, I think these bonds are worthy of investigating. I think these bonds are worthy of investing in. The sky is the limit. I think we should not restrict ourselves from discussing anything in this Legislature about this idea. I think it's good for Albertans. It's

good for Canadians. Yes, I think we should have some kind of preference, but maybe that could be built into a tax instrument. Yes, I think they should be RRSP eligible.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: We'll have five minutes for comments and questions. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, let me reassure the Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne that there is much too much respect for him in this Assembly for any smart aleck comments to be made. I don't want to speak for my colleague from Calgary-Buffalo, but he was simply making the point that as bonds these almost certainly already qualify for RRSP eligibility. That's what he was just trying to tell you, so we probably don't need to consult the federal government.

My comment or observation to the Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne is simply that I'm left almost with my head spinning here with his enthusiasm for this. A bond? This is debt we're talking about. Let's not kid ourselves. We're doing something here that's going to take this government into debt. When I hear the enthusiasm from an apparently fiscal conservative group for debt and hear them talking about the sky is the limit and so on, I'm startled, and I'm worried.

We worked hard, suffered a lot, and I think made some very serious blunders in getting out of debt, and to now hear this caucus wax enthusiastically about going into debt, apparently without limit – at least, that's the kind of comment I'm beginning to pick up – really concerns me. It concerns me as a legislator and as a citizen, somebody who seeks balance from its government. The lurching about here on fiscal policy from this government is nothing short of frightening.

I would just urge all members to understand what we're talking about here. We're talking about big-time debt. Now, maybe it's justified, but let's know clear-eyed exactly what's going on here. We're talking debt. So if we want to get into debt, let's think carefully here. It may well be that to build a new hospital or to build a seniors' centre or something, debt is okay. But I just want everybody to be really clear here. Your motion is about taking this province deeper and deeper and deeper into debt.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, Mr. Speaker, very good points by the opposition member. When I talk about the sky is the limit, the sky is the limit in the discussion that we should have. I appreciate your comments.

I remember when Liz and I got our first mortgage for our house. We didn't go into that debt very lightly, but we also knew that there was an opportunity for an investment so we could raise our family, and we could have a piece of real estate that we could call ours. Yeah, we called it ours and the bank's for a while. There's no doubt about that. But when we considered where we were going to borrow the money from, you know, one of the first issues in our minds was: "Well, we're going to borrow the money from a local bank, somewhere you can get some advice from, and we're going to borrow the money from maybe" – at the time the Alberta Treasury Branches was the instrument that we felt best to use.

If this government decides that we need to borrow money in the future, why would we want to go to a New York bank? Why would we want to go offshore? I'm saying: let's get it here. That's my point, opposition. I'm saying that we should not restrict ourselves to the discussion. Your discussion is valid, and there are good points that you've made. But I'm saying that if we're going to borrow, let's borrow here.

Plus, member opposite, I want to know what we're borrowing for, too. You know, I'd like a list that says: "Okay. This is why we're borrowing." I'll give you an example of the Whitecourt Hilltop school, that I graduated from, that my sons graduated from. About two years ago it went out for public tender to do a major retrofit and teardown of some of the 40-year-old wings in the school. Twenty-four million dollars was the lowest bidder. Plus, we had to encourage a second bidder to come along. It came out six months ago: \$13 million. What a time to invest. What a time. What an opportunity. Why – why? – constrict ourselves to this discussion?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to add my thoughts to those of my colleagues regarding this motion that would see the creation of Alberta capital bonds. These bonds would be a good investment opportunity for Albertans. They would also provide Albertans with another way to participate in building and strengthening our province.

I'm especially hopeful that funds raised through these bonds could help further support Alberta seniors and persons with disabilities. I'm excited about Alberta capital bonds for another reason as well, Mr. Speaker. I'm excited because Alberta capital bonds speak to me of the future. They speak of the future of this province and the future of our children and our grandchildren. I'm excited because they allow average Albertans to participate, young and old, rich or not so rich. Young parents who have a hundred dollars or \$200 can buy bonds to invest in the future postsecondary education of their children. There are many grandparents that I know who have grandchildren who own every toy and technological gadget available. What a wonderful way this is for grandparents to give gifts to their grandchildren, a gift that keeps on giving. When the children cash in these bonds when it comes time for their postsecondary education, they will remember how much they were loved or are loved by their grandparents. [interjections]

Now, Mr. Speaker, I would like to take a moment to commend this government for reintroducing the idea of government bonds. I notice my colleagues across the way are having a little bit of a chuckle, but I have to tell you that if I had the opportunity to invest in these bonds, I'd probably stand in line to be able to purchase a bond for a child's birthday or a child's Christmas present because, unfortunately, my grandchildren have too many toys.

As the others have mentioned, the Alberta government has had success with bonds in the past, including the capital bond campaigns in the late '80s and early '90s. The capital bond program being proposed today would greatly assist Alberta in moving forward during this difficult economic time.

I agree with others who have said that the bonds should be available only in Alberta and only for Albertans. I believe such a bond program can help foster a greater sense of Alberta pride and a real connection among Albertans with projects funded through their investments. By purchasing these bonds, Albertans would be guaranteed a competitive rate of return while giving them the opportunity to invest in a real and hands-on way in the future of their province.

Issuing capital bonds will also complement our government's four-point plan for economic recovery. For those who may need a refresher, that plan calls for reduced spending, the use of cash reserves such as the \$17 billion sustainability fund to cover revenue shortfall and protect key programs, ensuring Alberta's energy sector and other industries are globally competitive and continue to attract investment, and continuing to invest in public infrastructure.

It was no surprise that investing in public infrastructure was the main focus of this year's provincial budget. That's because investing in public infrastructure is a key way to stimulate economic activity during a recession, and I believe that capital bonds can play a significant role in supporting these efforts.

4:30

Mr. Speaker, it's a personal priority for me and a priority for this government that seniors have access to the right kinds of facilities to allow them to maintain their independence and to maintain essential connections to family and friends. The majority of seniors reside in their own homes. Some require home care supports and help from neighbours and family members. However, for those seniors who require additional personal and health care needs, there are facilities available for them, and our commitment remains to increase the quality, supply, and choice of continuing care.

In support of this priority our government committed more than \$190 million in capital funding in March of this year to help build and modernize more than 3,000 affordable supportive living spaces and lodge units across Alberta. In addition, since 1999 the Alberta government has invested \$246 million in capital funding toward developing or upgrading about 4,800 supportive living housing units. As announced in Budget '09-10, our commitment is reinforced through the allocation of additional capital funding to support the development of additional spaces. In light of these and other investments I believe this government has made significant strides forward in supporting the needs of Alberta's seniors.

But my colleagues and I in government recognize that more can be done. As it says in our government's economic recovery plan, *The Way Forward*, while "the foundations of our publicly-funded system are good . . . there are things we must improve or the system will not meet the needs of a growing and aging population." I wholeheartedly agree with this statement, and capital bonds can help. Funds raised through capital bonds can further support our priority of ensuring that seniors are aging in the right place using our continuing care strategy.

The benefits of this strategy are evident in communities across Alberta. In Red Deer, where I live, I can point to several examples where lives have improved and the community as a whole has improved as well from investments under the continuing care strategy. We have two major projects in Red Deer. We have Michener village, which has 220 long-term care beds. It will be completed in the spring of 2010 thanks to some support from this government. We'll have assisted living, we'll have independent living, and we'll just have regular living in what we call the community of care. Now, Bethany CollegeSide, which is also long-term care, will also have assisted living and will be a community of care.

Now, why is a community of care important to me? I'll tell you why. I experienced first-hand the sadness and almost the tragedy of a couple, an older couple, my grandparents, married over 65 years, being separated because one had to go into long-term care and the other couldn't be close to him. Knowing what that can do to that couple, my grandparents, and knowing what it can do to every other couple that has been together for a long period of time, to have a community of care where they can live in different levels of care but be close together is very important to me, so that's why I talk about a community of care and why it's important.

Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned earlier, Alberta's aging population is a key priority for this government. Every month Alberta has a thousand new seniors. The current number of seniors in this wonderful province is 386,000. This government remains committed to Alberta's seniors, and the focus on increasing the supply and

choice of continuing care spaces is reflective of that. As such, I believe that a portion of the funds through Alberta capital bonds could go toward developing and modernizing facilities for seniors.

I know Albertans are concerned about the help provided to seniors. They tell me so. I believe those same Albertans would be eager to support the government with these projects through a capital bond program, and I know Albertans would be proud to say that they helped support seniors and people with disabilities in the community. They would be proud to say that they helped build their province, and they would be proud to say that they helped their children or their grandchildren.

Whether this includes a facility for seniors or a roadway for them to travel on to visit their grandchildren or a school, a university that trains doctors, it doesn't matter. They'll be proud to be part of that because at the end of the day that's what this bond program should be all about, Albertans investing their money to support a meaningful and real, tangible difference in their province and their communities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: We have five minutes for questions and comments to the minister.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. I believe I heard somewhere in that speech – it was very eloquent and spoke of future generations and all that stuff – that you enjoyed this type of capital project and capital spending to stimulate the economy at this time. Are you, then, embracing that governments have a role to play in economies and in stimulating in times of economic downturn?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would agree with that. I think that it's very important to stimulate an economy in times of recession. It's not the time to stop spending. One of the things that's very important is to keep people working.

The interesting thing is that even in this time of economic recession we're still building the population of Alberta in more ways than one. We have lots of babies being born. We heard the Premier say that we have – I don't know – how many hundreds of babies being born every week in Alberta. We have people still coming to Alberta. So we still need to build infrastructure. What better time can there be than now, when prices are lower because bids are lower, because people need the work and want the work, compared to a boom time, when everybody is so busy that the prices are so high, they're unaffordable? This is the time to be building infrastructure. I can't think of a better way to build infrastructure than by having Albertans help you do that.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hehr: I'm done.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you.

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

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just a brief question to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. She was talking in a very impassioned speech about the many good things that capital bonds are going to do for this province. But I'm wondering if she has at all considered the fact that this is going to be

income, then, earned to parties in Alberta and therefore subject to Alberta taxation, and perhaps then we will gain some money back from any of the interest paid on these bonds. I wonder how she feels about that.

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, I said that this was the gift that kept on giving. Obviously, that's part of the giving. It comes back to us in more ways than one. Although I hadn't exactly considered that, it's an excellent point. It just helps to prove my point that Alberta capital bonds are a gift that keeps on giving.

The Deputy Speaker: Seeing no others who wish to question or comment, the chair shall now recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to participate in the debate on Motion 16. We've heard, certainly, some very interesting perspectives this afternoon in the course of the debate. I'm going to take the opportunity to comment on a few of those and then submit some of my own thoughts.

I guess to begin with I'd like to go back to the speech of the President of the Treasury Board, when he characterized what he hoped this debate would be. I believe the term he used was the art of the possible. For my part, Mr. Speaker, that's really what I'm hoping this debate will be about, a debate about Alberta's future. There probably isn't a whole lot of point in talking about the mechanics of how bonds would work unless we have a clear vision of the type of province we want to build in the future and what strategic role Alberta capital bonds might play in helping us get there. The President of the Treasury Board also talked about opportunities for youth, providing security for seniors, and I also think that's a similar invitation for us to maybe talk about this on a bit of a higher level.

For myself I guess just a few things in terms of the financial position of the province and why we might want to consider capital bonds as part of our economic policy. To be blunt, it goes back to the question of why we paid off the debt in the first place, Mr. Speaker. We have a budget in the order of \$36 billion in this province. The projected assets for the end of this year are in the range of \$35 billion. As for my thoughts, while I certainly don't subscribe to the idea of using bonds to cover operating deficit costs, I don't know very many successful business entities or other governments in the world that don't use the strength of their own balance sheet to fund their own future growth.

4:40

So I think we need to be cautious when talking with Albertans about the intent of the bonds – they're capital in nature – and we need to give them the freedom to believe that the strength of the balance sheet that they have built over successive generations and which we now have the privilege of stewarding as government is really an opportunity for us to invest in that growth and to provide for our collective vision of the future. I guess that's where I start in terms of why we need to be considering capital bonds. There isn't much point, Mr. Speaker, frankly, in the sacrifices that Albertans have made in the past if they don't have the opportunity to put those assets to work not only for the benefit of themselves but of future generations.

I raised the question a bit earlier about, you know: why did we pay off the debt, what is our vision of the future, and what strategic role do bonds play in that? I guess for me, and as the Premier often discusses, it really has to do with the question of our eventual transition from a largely resource-based economy to what we hope

will be a knowledge-based economy and perhaps a day when the revenue and investment that is generated from intellectual property and the development of knowledge capital, the commercialization of that capital, exceeds the revenue that's available to us through natural resources, which I think we'd all acknowledge are very, very important to us but also very volatile by their very nature.

I'm hoping that through the course of the debate we'll hear a bit of a discussion about how we move to a knowledge-based economy, what sort of infrastructure is required in order to get there, what level of integration is required between our postsecondary institutions and our business community, the education system in Alberta and what role that plays, and also our opportunities internationally and how we might position ourselves to market intellectual property to a much greater extent and perhaps aspire to be a global leader in that field. That's certainly one of the reasons that I chose to run for public office, and members around all sides of the House have talked about this in the past. Why don't we put on the table some specifics about how we might use capital bonds to help us get there?

There were a few other points raised that I'd like to respond to. The Minister of Seniors and Community Supports talked extensively about what I'll call social infrastructure. The opportunity to use funds raised through the sale of capital bonds to invest in seniors' facilities was one example.

We have an equally big challenge when it comes to health care in this province, Mr. Speaker. I'd ask the House to look at two factors. The first is the level of per capita spending in Canada on health care – we're about third in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development – and then the performance of our health care system internationally, which is at best middle of the pack in the last few benchmarking reports that I've looked at. It suggests to us that we're probably not getting the best bang for the buck from the money that we're spending on health care in the country. That's measured in terms of health outcomes, health system performance, and the overall health status of the population. I think we need to look at the opportunity that capital bonds could play in strengthening health infrastructure.

I guess the second is a fact that's often referred to in this House, and that's the percentage of health care spending that goes to labour costs, to funding for the salaries and benefits of health care professionals that deliver services. That figure, while it's come down in the last few years from about 80 per cent of total spending, now stands in the range of 75 per cent. What that means, Mr. Speaker, is that every dollar that we choose to spend from government on health infrastructure – on capital costs for hospitals, for clinics, for other facilities – is a dollar that's not available to us to deliver a greater level of health services that meet the needs of Albertans. I think capital bonds can play a tremendous role in building that health infrastructure.

The minister may or may not have referred to this – I'm sorry; I can't remember exactly – but my research shows that in addition to the \$119 million in provincial capital funding that was announced in March to modernize more than 3,000 affordable living spaces, if you look at all of the spending before that, add it up, the result is that this province has invested \$246 million in capital funding in the last 10 years to support the development or modernization of about 4,800 supportive living housing units.

I don't offer that statistic, Mr. Speaker, solely as a way to point out the government's recognition of need and their willingness to invest. I point out and I ask the House to consider the proposition that that \$246 million in capital funding also represents funding that wasn't available to us to provide home care or other direct services to seniors and others living with disabilities, although I think we all agree that our hope for them is that they can live as independently as

possible in the community. There are certainly some opportunities there to build some infrastructure through capital bonds that will allow us to put more into these sorts of direct services in the future. We're certainly going to need to do that in view of the demographic shift, the aging population, and so on. We've talked about that at length in this House in the past. So I'd offer those thoughts as reasons why we should be considering this proposition.

In terms of the specific offering, hon. members of the House have offered a number of thoughts about how the bond issue might be structured. I thought the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo made a good point when he talked about the possibility of offering the bonds in set limits. We might want to look at a particular series of bonds to suit specific purposes, and maybe we proceed in stages. That's perhaps something we should consider.

I also think that we need to look at the financial opportunity that we're offering Albertans in terms of not just investing in their own province. I'd be the first to agree that that's very, very important. But if we look at the contributions by Albertans through taxes to federal coffers minus what we receive back in services, I think most of us are aware that the net amount, the net contribution of Albertans to the rest of the country is about \$18 billion per year. That's a very substantial sum, Mr. Speaker. I think there are many Albertans, myself and my own constituents included, who, if they had an opportunity to target more of that money to Alberta, to Alberta projects, to Alberta's future, would readily choose to leave that money in this province and to make it available to pass on to future generations. I think that's a valid point as well.

I think I'm going to conclude there, Mr. Speaker. Again, I'd just like to reiterate my initial point. I think this should be a debate about the future of this province. I think that as elected members we should all have a clear vision for the province's future. It should be based on our own experience, of course, and our own thoughts, but more importantly we should be able to reflect well the views of our constituents.

I know that, for my part, in the constituency of Edmonton-Rutherford I'll be consulting extensively on this question with my own constituents. It's going to take a bit of work to explain the debt/deficit difference, but the more we reiterate in this House that we're talking about capital funds that are available for investment, that it's debt that's prudently undertaken, that it's with due regard to the balance sheet, the strongest balance sheet in any jurisdiction in North America for a government, I think we can have that discussion with them. But if we engage in discussions about fear, about entering a slippery slope and Albertans being back where they were in 1993, I think we do them a disservice. They have the opportunity and the privilege and certainly the right, Mr. Speaker, to chart a course for the future of this province and to expect that all of us as members of this House can contribute positively to developing strategies to achieve that vision.

With that, I'll conclude. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: We have five minutes for comments or questions. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, you talked about health care costs in your speech, and you indicated that labour costs are 75 per cent of the total health care bill. Does that 75 per cent include all of the individuals, including contractors, working at Alberta Health and Wellness, the individuals that work at Alberta Health Services, and also the people who would be contracted out, whether it's for other services provided to the regional health authority like long-term

care? Where exactly do you get that number of 75 per cent for labour costs in the health budget?

Thank you.

4:50

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

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the hon. member for that question. The figure I quoted is a national average. I got that figure from the Conference Board of Canada. In terms of how the specifics of the health care budget in Alberta break down compared to that percentage, I wouldn't have the answer to that question.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Thank you.
May I ask one more, Mr. Speaker?

The Deputy Speaker: Unless there's other indication.
The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford for really putting some thought and actual ideas into it, not merely platitudes and saying that this is the greatest thing since sliced bread, that Alberta is going back into debt again after a wholesale reversal of what this government told us for the last 15 years. It's really nice to see some actual thought put into what he would like to see out of a capital bond project. He's right on one thing, that this government hasn't been successful in 40 years of trying to diversify our economy. That is painfully evident right now as the money tree in the backyard, the oil and gas industry, isn't producing, and we're broke. A bit of a recognition of that in your speech in that we've got to look to developing our knowledge-based economy, possibly our wind, our environment. How do you see sort of your bond project, if you were talking about that, this capital bond project, being able to do those things? I'd like to hear your ideas on that.

Mr. Horne: I'll thank the hon. member for what he said, but I'm not sure whether he's offering a comment or a question.

First of all, Mr. Speaker, there is no question that the strength of the balance sheet of Alberta today is directly due to over 30 years of very solid financial stewardship by this government. We can have all the debates we want about spending on a year-to-year basis, and people will have various opinions across the House, but the fact that we have the balance sheet we do, that it is the strongest of any government in North America, is not a credit to the individual members of this House. It's a credit to successive generations of Albertans that worked to make that possible. I don't think we can state that often enough. With due respect to the hon. member, I guess my comment in reply would be that it's not about us; it's about Albertans. That's really what the nature of this discussion should be.

In terms of the question around how the funds raised through the bonds might play into planning in the future, the way I look at the 20-year capital plan, for example, is that it's a portfolio of projects. So rather than looking at individual projects, we look at an entire investment portfolio that is closely linked to a strategic plan for our province going into the future. I'm really talking here about 20, 30, 50 years down the road, the next generation. I see the bond issue as a way to provide a regular system of cash flow to fund that portfolio, not without the opportunity for us to discuss and debate changes that might be made as we proceed through time and as priorities change. But I really see it as a stable flow of cash for a long-term capital plan

rather than a way to fund individual projects. Hopefully, we'll hear some other ideas on that as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: You have only three seconds.

Mr. MacDonald: Oh, dear.

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

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to take part in this debate. Not often do we have an opportunity in this Chamber to discuss something that actually has the opportunity to inspire not only us in this room but all of Alberta. [interjection] The member across is making a snide remark about the term "inspire." But maybe he's right. You know, there's something about this Chamber that somehow precludes us from talking about things that actually inspire, precludes us from talking about things that could be. Instead, we often talk about things that can't be. It often requires of us, and particularly members of the opposition, to find the negative underlyings in no matter what it is that we do.

Well, there is one motion on the floor right now, that actually is not binding us. It's a motion, Mr. Speaker. It is not very technical in nature. It doesn't ask us to define the mechanisms of how these bonds would operate and what the percentage of lending would be and whether they will be offered in bulk or not and whether they will be offered only in Alberta or not. This motion only asks of us to blue sky about what can be done if such a bond was in place. Would it be the proper thing for government even to consider such a bond in the first place? It's unfortunate that the use of the word "inspired" is laughed upon in this particular Chamber. Perhaps it is the architecture of this Chamber that is not conducive to being inspired.

Mr. Speaker, these bonds would be for capital investment and capital investment only. It is very important to delineate that because if any member was to rise in this Chamber and say, "We have a shortage in operating dollars for running our programs or paying salaries and hence we should consider bonds," I would be the first one to rise in opposition to that because all we would be doing is incurring operating deficits which then lead to debts, and there is no end to that cycle. But this is for infrastructure debt, infrastructure that will employ people not only while it's being built but once it's built. Whether it's schools or nursing homes or whatever institutions they are, they will in turn end up employing Albertans who will be paying taxes and who will be serving the ever-growing Alberta population.

Also, I agree with the member of the opposition that it is an opportunity to diversify Alberta's economy. He refers to it as the money tree. Well, I'm not sure if money tree is a proper analogy, but if it is to be used, let's not forget who planted that tree in that backyard in the first place. Mr. Speaker, oil sands are available in provinces to the east and provinces to the west, and they haven't been explored. They had an opportunity to plant that tree. They didn't. It was this government that planted that tree. That's why we have the revenues from it. So I'm not sure if it is a good analogy, but if you want to use it, I might as well make a comment about it.

Another thing is that the opposition often talks about ethical investment. I agree with them that if money is to be invested by government or by individuals, it is important to know what it is that you're investing into. Coincidence would have it that tomorrow, actually, I will be going to a bank, buying a registered education savings account. Probably a chart will be put in front of me of various investment portfolios, but frankly, to be honest, Mr. Speaker,

I won't have an idea what it is that I'm investing my money into. It could be an operation in Europe or in Asia. It could be an investment house in New York. The fact is that I will be making my decision based on the risk factor and the rate of interest that will be given to me as a dividend, and that's how most Albertans invest right now in various vehicles that are available to them through banks.

Now, that would be an option. You know, as an Albertan I think I would feel much more comfortable knowing that my money is backing the operation and construction of facilities that are utilized by Albertans in my province, in my Alberta, that somehow my dollars, which I would have invested anyhow in a different investment vehicle, are building this province, that one day I can say: you know, I contributed to building, perhaps, this building or building this chain of buildings or supporting seniors or education or whatever it is. If I am going to invest these dollars anyhow – and I will – I might as well know where these dollars are going.

I know that some were laughing when the minister of seniors was talking about the sentimental aspect of it, but there is nothing wrong with being patriotic. There is nothing wrong with supporting your own province. We are doing that anyhow. Many of us volunteer in our own province. Many of us give endless donations to various charities and societies. Why not use our investment portfolio and see it as another way of donating and investing in our own province? I don't think there is anything wrong with that. I think it's actually the right thing to do. You invest at home first, before you send your money abroad.

5:00

I don't think there is anything ideologically wrong with using your equity, which this government has built up. As was properly pointed out by the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, our balance sheet is impeccable. We have a triple-A rating on international markets. We have some \$75 billion worth of liquid equity between all the endowment funds and all of our accounts. Why not use that to the benefit of Albertans? After all, why did our forefathers work so hard and save all that money and put us in the position that we're in right now? Why not leverage our ability to borrow and borrow from Albertans to build infrastructure for Albertans?

I would encourage members of this House to start focusing on the possibilities because I think that the possibilities really are endless, not endless in how much money we borrow but endless in how we utilize this new way of generating dollars and improving and investing in Alberta. I would encourage all members to blue sky a little about it because that's why we've been elected by our constituents, to be here and come up with solutions, come up with solutions to real problems.

There are simple solutions that many governments are doing. You know, you can just go out there and deficit spend. The outcome would be the same; you would still end up building a hospital or a school. But would it be the wisest way of doing it? Would it allow Albertans to participate in it? This allows Albertans to participate.

Mr. Speaker, I am very encouraged by this motion. I wish we had more motions like this on the floor that simply allow us to explore the possibilities. Let the bureaucracy of the minister of finance figure out the fine details and bring them back to us in the form of a bill of what this bond would look like. But at this point I think we should be discussing it. I encourage all Albertans out there to think about it and give us as MLAs feedback on it: how they feel about it, what they see the future of such a bond would be, and how they see such a bond being constructed.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Five minutes for questions and answers. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much. I have a question for the hon. member. Given that the Fiscal Responsibility Act was amended, allowing assets of the capital account, which the hon. member talked about, the balance sheet – these monies from the capital account in the case of 2009-10, the current fiscal year, were transferred from the stability fund. Now, has the hon. member given any consideration to the fact that if we're raising these bonds to be used for capital, could that money be transferred into the stability fund and used to fund operating deficits? Have you given that any consideration or thought?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, the reason we have this motion on the floor is to have that discussion. If you're suggesting that that would be the right thing to do, I will gladly take that as your input, that you're suggesting that money be transferred from one to the other and cover the operating expenses of the Alberta government. I personally suggest that that is not the right thing to do. In my opinion, if such bonds were to be issued, I would want them to be well defined because I want to have the ability to tell my constituents that these dollars will be enveloped, or dedicated, to infrastructure spending only. But your suggestion could be as good as mine. The fact is that I'm glad that you're engaging in this discussion because that's what it's really all about.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Clearly, the hon. member doesn't understand the amendment that came through this House in the spring which amended the Fiscal Responsibility Act. Assets of the capital account were transferred into the stability fund for this financial year. Okay? I can understand why the hon. member would be cautious, but can you guarantee that with this motion we will not be raising money through this issuance of capital bonds and have that amendment to the Fiscal Responsibility Act allow the government to quietly transfer all or a portion of this money on the balance sheet from the capital plan through to the sustainability fund and then withdraw it for operating funds? I'm not for that. I never did say that. What I want to know from the hon. member is: are you concerned that as a result of the amendment to that act possibly this could happen?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, see, that's exactly why I spent the first three minutes of my speech talking about the atmosphere of this Chamber. This member, it appears, has spent some time, obviously, trying to figure out a conspiracy theory: how this could go wrong and how money could possibly be siphoned from one account to another to somehow not tell constituents, Albertans, that money is being misdirected and misspent. But he hasn't taken the time to read the wording of the motion, which is actually one sentence long. The motion simply encourages the government to explore the possibility of having a bond. It doesn't tell you what the bond will look like. It doesn't limit this discussion at all. We haven't even conceptualized what this bond would be, and he already has a conspiracy theory on how the money will be misspent.

Mr. Speaker, the next motion should be that we somehow restructure this Chamber because, obviously, there are either air circulation problems or maybe the architecture is not conducive to talking about things that are inspirational because they seem to focus on conspiracy theories on subject matters that haven't even been developed yet. Imagine what theories they must have on things that are actually currently in place.

The Deputy Speaker: The next speaker would be the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, followed by the hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour to rise today and speak to this government motion and its benefits to education in Alberta. As we're all well aware, the world is facing a period of economic uncertainty, and Alberta is not immune to its effects. As we work our way through this recession, we must not abandon our long-term goals for Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, continuing to plan for the future while laying the foundation for a strong economic recovery is this government's highest priority as we move forward. To this end Alberta capital bonds could support capital infrastructure projects that will help our province remain competitive in the global market. We have an opportunity here to take advantage of historically low interest rates and continue our commitment to investing in Alberta's future.

Included in this vision is a continued commitment to education in our province. Education lies at the heart of Alberta's future prosperity, and it is imperative that the money generated from the sale of Alberta capital bonds be used in part to ensure that our education system remains one of the best in Canada. Alberta is proud to have one of the most skilled and educated populations in North America. For example, 60 per cent of Albertans 25 years of age and older hold a postsecondary degree, diploma, or certificate. Initiatives and programs to encourage this kind of lifelong learning are integral to a dynamic and competitive economy.

While we're fortunate that Alberta is rich in natural resources, knowledge is increasingly becoming Alberta's new renewable resource. Our outstanding education is at the centre of this change, and Alberta students are the future of this new knowledge-based economy. This is why, Mr. Speaker, continued investment in education is a key component of our economic recovery plan. With the money generated from these bonds, I encourage the government to further support the many innovative education initiatives currently under way.

5:10

For example, the Alberta schools alternative procurement initiative, known as ASAP, plans to deliver 14 new schools, which will result in the creation of more than 12,000 student spaces by 2013. Among these schools will be 10 elementary and middle schools and four high schools. In addition, the construction of these new schools will provide Albertans with additional jobs. By using the revenue generated from the sale of Alberta capital bonds to build future schools, we will be giving Albertans the opportunity to invest directly in the province's future. It is the people of this great province that will be creating jobs, building communities, and strengthening our economy. Also, we must take advantage of low building and material costs so that we can get the most for each and every dollar we spend. By making these investments now, we're setting the stage and preparing ourselves for when economic growth returns to our province.

Another important education initiative is Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta. As many of you know, I have spent the last year and a half as the chair of the steering committee on the Setting the Direction project.

Mr. MacDonald: I didn't know.

Mr. Bhardwaj: You do now.

Mr. Speaker, the Setting the Direction steering committee presented our recommendations to the minister in June of 2009. He

recommended that a new special education framework be created in order to continue Alberta's proud history of meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities and diverse needs. Protecting Alberta's most vulnerable, including children with special needs, must remain one of our government's top priorities. Programs such as those that help students with special needs must be sheltered in times of decreased prosperity. Albertans need to know that this government is committed to meeting their families' needs and the needs of those who are less fortunate.

Alberta Education has also initiated a unique discussion about the future of education in this province. The Inspiring Education initiative is based on five key values – opportunity, fairness, citizenship, choice, and diversity – and involves parents, teachers, and other education stakeholders. By engaging in this kind of productive discussion, we will continue to provide a secure and bright future for our children.

Another of Alberta Education's innovative programs is Alberta's high school completion framework. This initiative recognizes that Alberta's future prosperity rests on our ability to generate a well-educated workforce that is responsive to change. Unfortunately, not all of Alberta students are able to complete the requirements for a high school diploma. Alberta's high school completion framework reflects one of our education system's key priorities, which is to ensure that all of our students are successful both in school and in life. The framework includes a strategy to address some of the obstacles and challenges that students face in finishing high school. By giving our future leaders every opportunity to succeed, Alberta's high school completion framework helps to strengthen our economy today and for years to come.

Mr. Speaker, all of these initiatives aim to improve the quality of our children's education and contribute to Alberta's future. After all, a quality education system not only inspires a passion for knowledge and lifelong learning but contributes to the overall vibrancy and strength of our economy and our community. One of this government's priorities in the past has been to ensure strong communities throughout the province. It is through the support and education of our youth that we're able to build the foundation that is needed for a strong community.

By using Alberta capital bonds, we will be making an important investment in Alberta's future, and we must make sure that these programs continue to receive the support they need. This is the kind of investment that will see us emerge from these uncertain times stronger and more vibrant than ever. Education is a pillar of any strong and prosperous community, and I'm proud of the accomplishments of Alberta's world-class education system. In turn, what is required to maintain the world-class quality of this system is continuous support and investment. Offering Alberta capital bonds will enable this government to strengthen its commitment to quality education in Alberta. To this end, these bonds should be available primarily to Albertans as they have a vested interest in the future of this province.

This is, however, a chance for our government to promote Alberta as a great place to invest on both the local and global stage. As such, all those who would like an opportunity to invest in Alberta's future should be able to purchase Alberta capital bonds. By offering Alberta capital bonds on the global market, we can ensure that the Alberta economy remains competitive. We can also attract the key foreign direct investment that is required to strengthen our economy and promote Alberta on the world stage. In addition, the bonds should be readily available at all major financial institutions in order to make it as easy as possible for people to invest in Alberta's future.

Alberta capital bonds make sense in both the short and long term, and I wholeheartedly support this motion. Mr. Speaker, I would like

to thank you for the opportunity to speak to this government motion, which promotes strong community foundations in the face of this recession and will work to strengthen the quality of education in Alberta. I would also like to applaud the government for its strong leadership in these difficult economic times.

With that, I would ask all members to join me and stand in support of Government Motion 16. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: We have five minutes for comments or questions.

Seeing none, the chair shall now call on the hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks, followed by the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm also pleased to join in the discussion this afternoon on this important government motion. Government Motion 16 proposes the general approval of the government of Alberta issuing capital bonds in support of public infrastructure projects and facilities. I think this is a good idea and certainly a very interesting opportunity for Albertans. I also appreciate the opportunity to engage in the exchange of ideas with regard to what might work with regard to the issue of capital bonds.

I find it interesting that the Minister of Finance and Enterprise referred earlier this afternoon to the fact that Alberta hasn't issued bonds since about 1997, which is more than 12 years. I think that the whole matter of this being an idea that needs further development is where the opportunity lies. In terms of the detail of how capital bonds might work, I think there's a wide range of opportunity that obviously is available to us with regard to this, and I look forward to further detail coming forward from the Minister of Finance and Enterprise.

Certainly, I think the opportunity for families, for parents, for grandparents to invest in an instrument that is within the province of Alberta provides an interesting concept for investing in the future educational needs of their children and grandchildren. I think that there's a whole range of opportunities that can be developed as a result of this.

It's not really my intention to spend a lot of time with regard to what exactly the bonds should look like, but certainly from the perspective of being responsible with regard to these types of instruments, I think the fact that they are secure should be reflected in the rate of interest and the return that they bear so that this becomes something that works not only for people who are investing in them but is also a useful instrument for the province of Alberta. I find it interesting that a number of other jurisdictions have similar issues of bonds: Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, other provinces that all have issued bonds for their residents. I do think that with regard to what we're talking about here, it's important that these are restricted to be available to Albertans and only Albertans.

5:20

The second part of this motion refers directly to the investment in infrastructure projects and facilities. I think this is consistent with Motion 501, that was passed at the beginning of this session, that also talks about aggressive investment in infrastructure projects in this province. I note from our budget that this government has in this fiscal year proposed to invest \$7 billion in capital infrastructure projects. That's a very significant investment in the future of this province, and I think the concept of inviting Albertans to invest in some instruments that support that is consistent with many of the types of projects that we already invest in.

I think particularly of the Ministry of Culture and Community Spirit. I would expect that as members, when we drive through our

communities, we see a whole range of infrastructure projects that really make us proud of what our communities have accomplished. I know that in my constituency every community has projects that already have a great deal of investment from volunteers in the community, particularly the projects that are supported by the Ministry of Culture and Community Spirit, that already have at least 50 per cent investment from fundraising projects that community members have really led. I think that the idea of issuing Alberta bonds just adds to the pride that Albertans already have in many of the projects that have been supported.

This afternoon I was thinking for just a few minutes about the range of projects that are supported in our communities. I had mentioned Culture and Community Spirit. There's Agriculture and Rural Development; Tourism, Parks and Recreation; Municipal Affairs, a very significant investment in our communities; Infrastructure; Seniors and Community Supports; Housing and Urban Affairs; Health and Wellness; Education. Most of the ministries of this government invest in our communities, and I think that the concept of adding to that because of the issue of government bonds is something that we should take a good look at.

I certainly appreciate the input of other members through the course of the afternoon. While I think this is a blue-sky opportunity, an opportunity to take a look at what we can do, we also have to exercise balance in this whole thing, as I mentioned earlier, so that this is an instrument that works not only for the people who invest but also for us as government, an opportunity to support, again, the infrastructure projects, the roads, bridges, overpasses, hospitals, schools, and community facilities that all of us enjoy.

With that, I will lend my support to Motion 16 and look forward to the further development of this concept. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: We have five minutes for comments or questions.

Seeing none, the chair shall now recognize the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to stand up and to speak to the government motion.

I want to start off by saying that we all know that Alberta is a commodity-based province. Whether you're a farmer or you work in the energy sector, viability is a word that we all very much understand. Albertans have asked us to temper the hills and the valleys of our economy, and thanks to the consistent leadership of our Premier we have planned and prepared for times like we are facing now.

Earlier this month the Premier laid out our government plan to position Alberta for a strong economic recovery. A key part of this strategy is to continue to build our communities by investing in our provincial infrastructure. This will lay the foundation for future generations. This is a priority of our government, and it always has been. Let me say that again just for the members opposite. This is a priority for our government, and it always has been. This is why we created the municipal sustainability initiative. This consistent funding helps finance important infrastructure projects in our communities. It gives communities the ability to move forward now and to be able to plan for the future, Mr. Speaker, because strong communities benefit all Albertans.

Whether you are a new Albertan or you have deep roots in the province, Albertans love Alberta. They love the freedom to create and the spirit to achieve. They love the opportunity this province offers, and they also love their communities. Albertans especially love their libraries, schools, hospitals, and recreation facilities. The

Alberta capital bonds are an opportunity for Albertans to show their pride in their communities. These bonds are a chance for Albertans to invest in the communities they love, and this will help build a better, stronger Alberta in the future for everyone. I notice that there are a couple of members on the other side that are wiping tears.

I will say that I do share the Premier's commitment to strong communities. This has guided our ministry and guided myself in everything we do. We want Albertans to continue to take pride in their communities, and by providing the opportunity to purchase these bonds, this will be achieved.

Mr. Speaker, again, this is why I am so pleased to support this motion, because this motion supports Albertans. Thank you so much.

The Deputy Speaker: We have five minutes for comments or questions.

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my sincere pleasure to rise today and speak to this motion. This motion is just another example of how forward-thinking ideas can improve Alberta's quality of life today and tomorrow. By issuing Alberta capital bonds today, we will be able to reap the benefits for many years to come, but it is just one step in a larger strategy to further strengthen Alberta's economic position.

This government has a clear plan to lead Alberta out of the recession, and I would like to speak specifically to the four points of the plan for economic recovery. The first part of this plan focuses specifically on the fiscal challenges that we currently face, and while this government will not make reductions in the programs that Albertans rely upon, we will have to live within our means. That's why the first step in our plan will responsibly limit government spending, and our goal is to have Alberta back into a surplus position in three years. Alberta capital bonds will help achieve this objective by maintaining and creating further economic activity in this province.

5:30

The second part of our plan is to use the cash reserves that are in the sustainability fund. Now, these funds will cover revenue shortfalls through this period. I want to take a moment to speak specifically on the foresight that this government had in creating a sustainability fund. Over the past few years the amount of money that we have saved was substantial. Seventeen billion dollars – that's not millions; that's billions – went into the sustainability fund specifically for times just like now. This government fully understood the volatility of the energy markets and the correlation between these markets and our budgetary revenues. That's why in years when we had significant surpluses, we did not spend it all, as some of the members opposite urged. We put money into savings, and now is the time to use these funds so that we can protect our key programs. This government had the discipline and the foresight to save, and because of this Alberta is in a better position than any other jurisdiction in Canada and most likely better than any jurisdiction in North America. By issuing Alberta capital bonds, we will continue to lead Canada in economic activity so that we will overcome the economic downturn earlier and in an even stronger fiscal position.

Now, the third part of our plan is to continue investing in public infrastructure. Over the past few years this government has invested in the construction of new schools, new hospitals, new senior facilities, and new highways: all projects that were very, very highly prized and very highly needed for Alberta. Today all across this province we see cranes standing high. Now, whether it's at the south Calgary hospital or the Calgary and Edmonton ring roads, we

see men and women working hard to build the infrastructure for tomorrow. While one day members opposite say to spend more on infrastructure and the next day they say we should spend less and stop building infrastructure, this government has had a plan and will stick to it to build the needed infrastructure.

That's where this motion comes in. By reintroducing Alberta capital bonds, Albertans will be investing further into provincial infrastructure and continue to build up Alberta's future. While investing in these projects, Albertans will also be receiving financial returns for their investment. Now, I know that in the past I've been investing in Ontario bonds. I've been investing in B.C. bonds. I've been investing in all these other bonds because Alberta didn't have any bonds. I would have loved to have been able to invest in Alberta bonds. Just think of the prospect of investing in infrastructure projects that would directly benefit your community now while at the same time earning a competitive interest rate.

Now, if we can provide a competitive interest rate, Alberta investors will find these capital bonds a smart and secure investment. Because of our solid credit rating and also because of this province's fiscal history, investors will have confidence, knowing that their investments are secure, because, hey, there's no other place in the world that has a higher credit rating than Alberta does. Now, together with a high rate of return and the opportunity to build up our communities, there will be a win-win situation for Albertans.

Across this province the cost of building infrastructure has declined and in some cases up to 40 per cent, which, in effect, provides better value for the taxpayer now. In addition, by investing in the infrastructure projects, we will be prepared for the expected growth for many decades to come. We need new schools to educate the leaders of tomorrow, we need new health facilities to care for the increasing and aging population, and we need new highways and transportation corridors to facilitate projected economic growth.

This leads me to the fourth part of our economic recovery plan, which is to make sure that our energy and other industries are competitive and attract the investment we need to develop Alberta's resources. Mr. Speaker, this section of our plan is made possible by the first three parts. By living and spending within our means and returning to surplus, by expending our cash reserves to maintain services, and by building up our public infrastructure, we can be assured that Alberta will continue to be the most competitive environment for businesses. This is important because if Alberta is competitive, the business that resides in Alberta can also be competitive, which will lead them to be world leaders in their sector. That is what Alberta is.

Our students are world leaders in their academic fields. We have world-class health centres and physicians, and we have world-class infrastructure. But as this motion exemplifies, we are also world leaders in fiscal responsibility. We were prepared for this economic downturn, and with the passage of this motion we will continue to be leaders in fiscal responsibility for years to come.

I urge all members of this House today to stand in support of this motion. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: We have five minutes for comments or questions. The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I guess just sort of a question as we continue to go down the line of government members who embrace this form of government debt, embrace this bond issue. I was just wondering if looking back now, in hindsight, with us going down this path of taking on government debt, you look at the law you guys passed or the former Klein government passed where they said that we'll never go into debt again. Do you think that was rather a silly law given the situation we're now in?

Ms DeLong: This actually doesn't have to be a situation of debt. In other words, if we have cash on hand – okay? – which balances off the bonds, we are not in debt. So as long as we have cash on hand to balance it off – you know, our assets are way over our liabilities – it gives Albertans the chance to invest in really solid bonds.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. I was listening to the hon. member's speech, and just before the hon. member concluded, she stated that we in this province were prepared for the economic downturn. If that's true, how did we go from an \$8 billion surplus to a \$7 billion and counting deficit so quickly?

Ms DeLong: I am really pleased to be able to answer that question. The number one thing that really irks me about this whole thing is that "deficit" – okay? – is the technical name for it. But if you knew that you wanted to go to university, you would save up some money. You would put it aside. When you went off to university, you would be spending more than came in, but, my goodness, you'd have the savings there. So you wouldn't call it a deficit; you would call it just saving ahead and planning ahead and using your money wisely. That is exactly what we are doing.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Seeing no other questions, the chair shall now recognize the hon. Minister of Environment.

5:40

Mr. Renner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have an opportunity to address this motion this afternoon. I've been listening intently all afternoon, and I've heard some really well-thought-out presentations about this whole concept of capital bonds. I've heard some, I think, valid concerns that have been raised by both sides of the House. This at the end of the day is not designed to be some sort of blank cheque, that government can go on some sort of free-for-all spending spree. What this is all about is allowing the government the flexibility to take advantage of some of the lower than expected tendering that we're experiencing as a result of some of the depressed economic conditions that we find ourselves in. But more importantly, Mr. Speaker, it gives Albertans an opportunity to invest in their own province.

I think that there are a couple of things that we have to spend a little bit of time thinking about today and throughout the discussion on this issue of capital bonds before the government moves forward. After all, Mr. Speaker, this is a motion that indicates that this Assembly supports the development of capital bonds. This is not the operational side. This is not the motion that is going to, upon being voted on, bring about capital bonds the next day. Clearly, a lot of work needs to go into dealing with the process and putting in the necessary background that will accompany bond issuance.

What this discussion is all about, what this debate is all about is an indication of whether or not the members of this House are in support of the concept of capital bonds and whether the members of this House recognize some opportunities that would be associated with capital bonds. But equally important, Mr. Speaker, are some of the challenges and some of the cautions that the members of this Assembly would bring forward to the government in the development of the bonds.

Clearly, what I've heard, Mr. Speaker, from the opportunities perspective is that this will allow Albertans to invest in their own province. But the challenge of that is that there may be Albertans who, while they would like to participate in this structure, may find themselves in a situation where the bond issue was set too high. If

you somehow set a minimum of \$10,000 or something like that, I think I've heard pretty clearly that that's maybe a market that this Assembly would not support. I've heard reference to people purchasing bonds in much smaller denominations that could be used to be the basis for some kind of ongoing legacy or foundational family investment for children and grandchildren and those kinds of things. What I'm hearing is that there are a number of members who are suggesting that we should have these bonds available in lower denominations, perhaps \$500 or a thousand dollars, so that a larger cross-section of Albertans could participate.

I've also, I think, heard that there may be a need for us to put an upper limit on the issuance of these bonds. We should think about whether or not an upper limit needs to be in place because, as we've heard, this is the kind of investment that many of the seniors in Alberta would look to to bring some kind of income stability to, in some cases, very limited investment portfolios. If the interest rate is enticing enough, the last thing we need is some institutional investor coming in and taking up the entire bond issue in the wink of an eye. Believe me, Mr. Speaker, there are investment houses out there that could take up a few hundred million dollars before you even know what's going on. I've heard around the room today that that's probably something that would not be recommended or supported by the members of the House. Clearly, this needs to be aimed at Albertans, and it needs to be aimed at Albertans, perhaps, of more modest means, so there need to be some parameters put on it.

I've also heard, Mr. Speaker, that this is not something that we should associate with Albertans investing in specific projects. This is not the kind of issue that someone would come out and say: I will buy these bonds if you build my school. That's not what this is all about. This is about allowing the government to deal with the 20-year capital plan in, perhaps, a little bit faster fashion, recognizing that the opportunities that we have now may not be here in the balance of that 20-year plan and the costs – some of the projects are coming in at a much reduced price – may not always be there. This is not designed to all of a sudden create a whole bunch of expectations that suddenly everybody's wish list can be fulfilled if Albertans invest in these bonds. This is about making some prudent investments based upon what is already an established capital plan.

I also think that this is an opportunity for Albertans to initiate and show that they want to be investing in their own province. They want to have that opportunity to be proud Albertans to be investing in the future of this province. Above all, Mr. Speaker, I think that's what this investment opportunity is all about. It's about prudent financial management on the part of the government, and it's about allowing Albertans to take pride and invest in their province.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I will take my seat.

The Deputy Speaker: We have five minutes for comments or questions.

Seeing none, the chair recognizes the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

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

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we call it 6 p.m. and adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:48 p.m. to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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