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The 28th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday, April 14, 2014

Issue 17

The Honourable Gene Zwozdesky, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 28th Legislature

Second Session

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Woo-Paw, Hon. Teresa, Calgary-Northern Hills (PC)
Xiao, David H., Edmonton-McClung (PC)
Young, Steve, Edmonton-Riverview (PC)

Party standings:

Progressive Conservative: 58 Wildrose: 17 Alberta Liberal: 5 New Democrat: 4 Independent: 3

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STANDING AND SPECIAL COMMITTEES OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ALBERTA

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| Dorward | Pastoor |
| Eggen | Quadri |
| Hehr | Rogers |
| Kubinec | Rowe |
| Lemke | Sarich |
| Luan | Stier |
| McDonald | |

Standing Committee on the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund

Chair: Mr. Casey

Deputy Chair: Mrs. Jablonski

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| Amery | Khan |
| Barnes | Sandhu |
| Dorward | Sherman |
| Eggen | |

Select Special Ethics Commissioner Search Committee

Chair: Mr. Rogers

Deputy Chair: Mr. Quadri

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| Blakeman | Leskiw |
| Eggen | McDonald |
| Goudreau | Saskiw |
| Lemke | |

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Chair: Ms Olesen

Deputy Chair: Mrs. Forsyth

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| Cusanelli | McAllister |
| DeLong | Notley |
| Fenske | Pedersen |
| Fritz | Sandhu |
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| Leskiw | |

Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

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Deputy Chair: Mr. McDonald

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| Blakeman | Quadri |
| Brown | Wilson |
| DeLong | Young |
| Eggen | |

Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

Chair: Mr. Zwozdesky

Deputy Chair: Mr. VanderBurg

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| Casey | Mason |
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| Fritz | Sherman |
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| Kubinec | |

Standing Committee on Private Bills

Chair: Mr. Xiao

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| Allen | Notley |
| Brown | Olesen |
| Cusanelli | Rowe |
| DeLong | Stier |
| Fenske | Strankman |
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Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing

Chair: Ms Kubinec

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| Casey | Pedersen |
| Kang | Saskiw |
| Khan | VanderBurg |
| Luan | Wilson |
| Notley | Young |
| Olesen | |

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Deputy Chair: Mr. Dorward

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| Bilous | Sandhu |
| Donovan | Sarich |
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| Brown | Xiao |
| Calahasen | Young |
| Casey | |

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, April 14, 2014

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Hon. members, let us pray that our actions today result in improvements tomorrow for those whom we are pledged to serve in this Assembly. Amen.

This being Monday, I would ask you to please remain standing now for the singing of our national anthem as led by Mr. Robert Clark.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. members. Thank you, Mr. Clark. Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

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

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a delegation of members and officials visiting Alberta from the state of Western Australia. The members are from the House of Assembly and from the state's second Chamber, known as the Legislative Council. They are only in Edmonton for a short time as they, unfortunately, have to leave tomorrow morning for Saskatchewan. They will then visit Victoria for meetings prior to returning to Australia. I'd like to welcome them to Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, they're seated in your gallery, and I'd ask them to rise as I call their names: the Hon. Barry House, MLC, President of the Legislative Council; Ms Wendy Duncan, MLA, Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Assembly; Hon. Kate Doust, MLC, deputy leader of the opposition in the Legislative Council; Mr. Roger Cook, MLA, deputy leader of the opposition; Hon. Paul Brown, MLC; Dr. Graham Jacobs, MLA; Mr. Russell Bremner, executive manager, parliamentary services department; Mr. Nigel Pratt, Clerk of the Legislative Council; and Ms Kirsten Robinson, Deputy Clerk of the Legislative Assembly. Please join me in giving them the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly. Welcome.

The Speaker: Thank you.

It's indeed an honour having all of you here. It's my first time to welcome a colleague Speaker. Mr. House, thank you, sir.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Let us begin with school groups.

Mr. Drysdale: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of

constituents who have travelled to Edmonton today from Elmworth, Alberta. I had the chance to visit with this group of bright students earlier today, and I'm glad that they're able to be here in the Legislature. This school is probably one of the schools closest to the Alberta-B.C. border in the province, so they've come a long ways today. The Grade 9 students from Elmworth school along with their teacher and helper, Mr. Christian Gee and Mr. Brian Grant, are seated in the public gallery, and I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation, followed by the Minister of Education.

Dr. Starke: Well, Mr. Speaker, thank you. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 33 visitors representing the School of Hope. They come to us from all over Alberta. Indeed, the School of Hope provides a very unique and interesting educational model in that these are all home-school families and home-school students. They come from all over the province, but the School of Hope's headquarters is in Vermilion, in my constituency. I'm also very proud that they're here because my own two sons are graduates of the School of Hope. They are seated, I believe, in the members' gallery, and I would invite them to rise and receive the warm and traditional welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, it's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly one of the best grade 6 teachers in the province of Alberta, Colleen Tremblay, and her grade 6 class from Guthrie school, which is located at Edmonton Garrison in my constituency, just on the north edge of the city here. I have spent a great deal of time at Guthrie with the Gators since being elected as MLA. I'd have to say that my favourite occasion was last month, on March 12, when we recognized and honoured the Canadian troops as our country's 12-year commitment to Afghanistan came to an end. Most of these students have parents who have served in Afghanistan – their strength and determination are truly inspiring – including one of the parents here today, Chris, who is in the air force, and his wife, Lorraine. I'd ask these students and staff to please rise along with the parent helpers so that they can receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Fox: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions today. It's my pleasure and honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a group of grade 6 students from the Kisipatnahk school in Maskwacis. The school is a Cree cultural school offering instruction in Maskwacis Cree language. They're here for a few days enjoying the School at the Legislature program. The students are accompanied by their teachers, Ms Bridget Milligan and Mr. Jordan Roasting, and parent helper Elmira Moonias. Please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Your second introduction.

Mr. Fox: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my great pleasure that today I get to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly my recently-announced fiancée, Rachael Bradford. Rachael has become a very special and important person in my life. She centres me and keeps me focused. She is there when I need someone to talk to and when I need someone to listen. More importantly, she is the person that I want to travel the road of life

with. If you can't tell, this is the woman that I have fallen head over heels for. Rachael, please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Are there other school groups?

If not, let us proceed with other guests, starting with Leduc-Beaumont, followed by the Minister of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to introduce to you and through to all members of the Assembly the members of the education advisory committee. This provincial committee offers pedagogical expertise to the visitors' services office in their development of educational programming and represents elementary, junior and senior high, and postsecondary education across Alberta. With us today are Sandy Myshak from Edmonton public schools, Anne Marie Brose from Grant MacEwan University, Dr. Craig Harding from Calgary public schools, Corvin Uhrbach from Wolf Creek public schools in Ponoka, Constance Scarlett from the Alberta Museums Association, and Wally Diefenthaler, educational consultant.

Mr. Speaker, I'd also like to recognize Dr. Carla Peck from the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education and Brian St. Germain of the aboriginal family and school program in Red Deer, who could not be with us today.

My guests are seated in the public gallery – they've already risen – and I would ask that they receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour, followed by Calgary-Hawkwood.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a very young constituent of mine who this morning walked into my office by himself and said that he wanted to meet his MLA and shared his points of view on a number of very topical and current issues. He tells me that he also engages his teacher and very often wins debates with the teacher. This is Jacob Manz, and Jacob is a student at the Lago Lindo elementary school. You will be seeing him over here one day, I imagine. He is accompanied by his grandmother Ms Penny Miller. Welcome to both of you.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hawkwood, followed by the Associate Minister of Wellness.

Mr. Luan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a group of very special friends of mine. They represent various organizations, but most importantly they are here to support the member's statement I'm going to make about the second oil and gas symposium. As I mention my guests, I'd ask them to rise: Joanne Gui, president of the Chinese Professionals and Entrepreneurs Association of Calgary and also the chair of the second symposium; Nancy Bi, a member of the same organization; Mark Gerlitz, consultant and vice-chair of the committee; Mason Wei, general secretary of the Canada China Chamber of Commerce, which is cohosting the symposium; Edward Liu, principal of ECSSSEN school; Ray Pan, a third-year student at the U of A who also worked a summer internship for me last year. I would like to personally thank each one of them for their dedication and hard work, and I'd ask the House to give them a warm welcome.

The Speaker: The Associate Minister of Wellness, followed by Lacombe-Ponoka if you have a third.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This past weekend Alberta celebrated the third annual Get Outdoors Weekend, or GO, which occurs every second weekend in April. It was an incredible success in great part due to our new GO ambassadors. I'm honoured to introduce four dedicated, humble, extraordinary gentlemen from the Edmonton Eskimos. I would ask that they rise as I call their names. Calvin McCarty is the longest serving active member of the club, kicking off his eighth season with the team as running back par excellence. He's very articulate. He's been named the Eskimos' top Canadian on two occasions and is the 2013 nominee for the Tom Pate award. That, of course, is for the CFL's most outstanding volunteer.

Jonathan Crompton. I was going to say number two, but he's definitely not number two, is he, Jonathan? He was an all-American in high school. He played at the University of Tennessee before being drafted into the NFL by the San Diego super-Chargers. Jonathan is an extremely outgoing young man. Check him out.

Ryan King was born and raised here in Edmonton. He played high school football in Sherwood Park at Bev Facey and is now a linebacker for the Eskimos. But, folks, with the way he throws and runs, I think he might be able to compete for the positions of the two other players as a matter of fact.

Joining the players today is the incomparable Nick Pelletier, community relations co-ordinator for the club, who helped arrange Thursday's game at Austin O'Brien high school.

I'd also like to thank Jon Cornish of the Calgary Stampeders – you may know that he's the CFL's reigning most outstanding Canadian, most outstanding player – who was instrumental in our GO activities in Calgary on Friday with both the seniors at Bethany and the students at Bishop Carroll.

Mr. Speaker, you know, this is a little bit difficult for me as a Stamps fan, but I now have four members of the green and gold to cheer for. They are seated behind me, and they have my back at least for today. I ask my colleagues to join me in saluting Calvin, Jonathan, Ryan, and Nick for their leadership in promoting active lifestyles and for their dedication to our community.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: Hon. members, two minutes each for members' statements. We should be able to get three in. Let's start with Calgary-Hawkwood and then go to Drumheller-Stettler.

Sino-Canadian Oil and Gas Symposium

Mr. Luan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise again for my member's statement. I would like to inform the hon. members of this House that the second annual Sino-Canadian Oil and Gas Symposium is scheduled for Saturday, June 21, at the Red and White Club in Calgary.

Last year, working along with many organizations, including the Chinese Professionals and Entrepreneurs Association of Calgary, the Calgary Chinese Petroleum Club, and the Canada China Chamber of Commerce, we have piloted the very first symposium, and that symposium was a success. It drew over 500 attendees with keynote speeches from the Minister of Energy, the consul general of the People's Republic of China, industry leaders,

and many, many of my colleagues in this House. As reported by Global News, this was a first-of-its-kind conference that brought together industry professionals, Chinese and Canadian investors, and many Alberta MLAs.

This year's symposium will focus on energy globalization and collaboration, which is particularly relevant to Alberta. Energy globalization is not a recent development. However, the surge of growing markets in emerging countries has definitely elevated this higher. Historically Canada was able to primarily focus on the U.S. market. Today that's no longer the reality. I believe the Sino-Canadian Oil and Gas Symposium provides an excellent forum to increase collaboration with emerging markets for our Canadian diversification.

Please join me and other representatives on June 21 at the Red and White Club in Calgary for the second annual Canadian oil and gas symposium.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Drumheller-Stettler, followed by Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock.

Government Culture

Mr. Strankman: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we resume this session, we do so with an air of uncertainty and instability on the government side of the House. The uncertainty and instability are due to the resignation of the Member for Calgary-Elbow as Premier. So what's next? Will this queue up the opportunists? Opportunists are those who choose to take advantage of any situation to achieve an end, usually with no regard for principles or consequences.

If regard had been given to these principles and consequences, those within the government caucus would have spoken up prior to the Premier's resignation. Those that will be seeking the Premier's position from within this government have some explaining to do. What transpired under their previous leader, whom they all willingly stood in this House and supported? This most certainly has been a group effort. The entire government caucus is party to the actions of their former leader, since silence, they say, is the voice of complicity. Disregard for principles and consequences stems from the short-sighted ambitions of those who seek only power.

It is my hope that the present culture of entitlement that thrives within this PC government is not carried on by the next Premier. The key ingredient to any government plagued by entitlement is cronyism, and cronyism is the first step towards corruption. The two elements work hand in hand and facilitate each other. Alberta has suffered from the effects of out-of-control cronyism, with special favours being the rule rather than the exception.

As we make our way through another session in this Legislature, let's not forget why we're here. It is the responsibility of every member of this House to act in the best interests of their constituents, and special favours are never in those best interests. In the end, when it comes to cronyism, if you aren't a part of the solution, you are part of the problem.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock.

Mental Health Services

Ms Kubinec: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mental illness has long been an unspoken taboo in our society. Mental health problems have often been swept under the rug. These weren't problems that

we were supposed to talk about or admit to even though we all know that ignoring a problem doesn't make it go away. The fact is that 1 in 5 Albertans will experience mental illness in their lifetime, and the other four will have a friend, relative, or colleague who will be affected. I am someone who wants to speak about the devastating effects of mental illness. Recently mental illness affected my own family, when we lost a beloved nephew to suicide.

Many people need help, and I am proud to say that the Alberta government is committed to providing this help through early intervention services, counselling, and treatment beds for those with the most serious needs. The Premier and the Minister of Health announced last week that Budget 2014 has provided \$28 million in new funding, bringing Alberta Health's mental health budget to \$48 million. This is in addition to the \$600 million that Alberta Health Services spends on mental health. We recognize that we need to give mental health support to our children and our youth, so I am pleased to note that permanent funding for mental health programs is now being provided in more than 153 schools in 55 Alberta communities.

Budget 2014 renews and strengthens the Alberta government's commitment to programs and services for mental health promotion, illness prevention, early intervention, and treatment for people whose lives have been touched by mental illness or addiction. What this means is that kids and families across Alberta will continue to have access to a wide range of services and supports. I am proud to speak about this advocacy and continued investment in the mental health and wellness of our children, families, and communities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

1:50

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: Hon. members, you're reminded that you have 35 seconds for the question and 35 seconds maximum for the answer.

Let's start the clock, and let's go with the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Government Airplane Usage

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, as government flight manifests show, this government's practice of flying high on the taxpayer's dime is even more egregious than we were first led to believe. Apparently, the Premier, her daughter, and a staff entourage flew multiple times on the government planes, including a trip to Jasper on a government plane for a weekend vacation during the June floods. The purpose of the trip was listed as meetings with government officials. Could the Premier tell us which officials the previous Premier met with on this trip, and what, if any, government business was done?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I think it's extremely inappropriate for the hon. member to characterize the trip as a vacation. She does not know that. That is not an appropriate assumption. The assumption has to be that people using government planes are using them for government business and for appropriate government business. Unless she has any evidence to the contrary, I would suggest she not describe a trip in that way.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, that's why I asked the question, so the Premier could clarify what government business was done. He declined to.

This government has assured us that there are rigorous guidelines in place to prevent these abuses of taxpayer dollars

from happening. However, guidelines are only as good as the people who enforce them: in this case, the Minister of Finance and his government aircraft co-ordinator, who works right out of his office. To the Minister of Finance: if clear guidelines existed to prevent these abuses from happening, why did he choose not to enforce them?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, as the Premier so aptly put it, there is no evidence that this was not for government business. I don't personally recall the actual details around the trip, but I can tell you that the Auditor General is going to review how government aircraft are handled in this province. He's going to look at the efficiency of those aircraft. We look forward to that report.

Ministers and the Premier are responsible for who goes on the plane, Mr. Speaker. We've had municipal officials, we've had MLAs, we've had guests of the ministers on those planes. The empty seat costs no more to the taxpayer.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, if there was government business, the obligation is on them to release it. I'm calling on them to release what government business happened in Jasper that weekend because it's now clear that this government just can't be trusted to responsibly own and operate a fleet of aircraft.

The government of British Columbia, with all of its remote locations, makes do without the luxury of a government fleet and uses commercial flights for the vast majority of their air travel, about 95 per cent. Alberta's fleet of government planes is clearly unnecessary and frequently abused. To the Premier: will he agree to sell the government fleet?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, the comparator to B.C. is probably not as accurate as the hon. member would like it to be. The B.C. government does charter helicopters and other planes to get their members elsewhere in the province, at considerable expense. Saskatchewan actually owns a jet; so does Manitoba. Other provinces use their planes. The difference is that we are transparent about the manifests and when we use the planes. It's very difficult to do that in other jurisdictions. This is the gold standard.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition. Second main set of questions.

Ms Smith: That's how we're able to see that it's frequently abused and not used responsibly.

Mr. Speaker, the Finance minister's department owns the fleet and makes the rules for their use. The person who books and controls the planes works out of the Finance minister's office, in room 423 of this building. The Finance minister had to know about the abuse, the deadheading, the duplicate flights, the use of the planes for vacations, and the travel back and forth to PC Party fundraisers. For the Finance minister to not know was either wilful negligence or incompetence. Minister, which is it?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, it is neither. The planes are used to get cabinet ministers, the Premier, and the Lieutenant Governor to various locations around this province because we want to talk to Albertans. We want to be in their communities, and they want us to be there as well. To characterize simply the fact that they know where we went as being abuse of the planes, frankly, is irresponsible, and the hon. member should know that.

Ms Smith: And also, apparently, children, nannies, and friends on the government planes.

Mr. Speaker, the antibullying minister missed an opportunity a few weeks ago to apologize to Albertans for her crass remarks about electricians. You should listen up, Minister, because this is also a teachable moment. Records show that she had her daughter fly on the government planes in violation of government policies. Will the antibullying minister apologize to Albertans for wasting taxpayer dollars, and will she pay the money back?

Ms Jansen: I thank you for the question. As I understand it, the flight policy implemented in 2010 indicates that passengers approved for government flights are at the discretion of the minister responsible. It didn't cost a dime extra for my daughter to travel on that flight. If it did, I would happily pay the money back.

Ms Smith: It's not what the policy was that the Auditor General described. He said that only spouses would be able to travel on government planes and only if they were attending events. It's interesting that the change of policy occurred, and no one knew about it.

It's quite clear that this government can't be trusted. They grasp at every entitlement and perk, they never care about the taxpayer, and they never consider that the money could be better spent helping vulnerable Albertans. It costs \$7 million a year to maintain the government fleet. Other provinces have sold their fleets, and this government should follow suit. To the Premier: will he agree to sell the unnecessary and frequently . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, obviously, the negativity of the questioning in the House today is indicative of what's been going on on that side for a while. The truth of the matter is that the Auditor General did review the policies in previous years and actually said that there was value in us having those planes to get to various places around our province. He did make a recommendation that it should be for spouses. If the hon. opposition had done their homework, they would realize that after that the government did come out with a policy where we said that the ministers will be responsible for the guests on the plane because it might not be the spouse. It might be the mayor of High River. It might be some MLA from the opposition.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Third and final set of main questions, opposition leader.

Ms Smith: So they ignored the Auditor General's recommendation. Nice work.

Government Advertising

Ms Smith: All over Alberta you can't turn on a radio without hearing advertisements promoting this government's budget, which, by the way, hasn't passed yet, Mr. Speaker. You might want to look into that. Albertans are inundated with misleading and dubious statements about this government's building Alberta plan. I think my two previous questions clearly show that billing Alberta is the more appropriate phrase. To the Finance minister: just how much money is being wasted on advertising a budget that hasn't even passed yet?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, the only dubious and misleading comments that have been coming out are from the opposition around what this budget is all about. This budget is about building Alberta. It's about putting schools, roads, and hospitals where

Albertans need them. It's about an economy that is double – double – the Canadian average in terms of its growth. It's about a place where three times the national average of the population is moving to this province. Why? Because it is a responsible government that is building the infrastructure those new Albertans want and need, because we're creating the jobs that Albertans are looking for. Those are the priorities of Albertans, not the questions that were dubious.

Ms Smith: This PC government seems to think that wasting taxpayer money is their right and their entitlement, and Albertans are tired of it. We already know about the \$3 million that has been spent on Building Alberta signs all over the province, and we just learned that the government decided to waste 10,000 taxpayer dollars to buy Building Alberta promotional jackets for the Premier, government ministers, their staff, and others. Does the Premier think that hard-working taxpayers should be buying him and his well-paid colleagues jackets to promote the government's propaganda?

Mr. Hancock: No, Mr. Speaker. In fact, I didn't get a jacket. I'll have to look into that. Any time that people look into promotional items for a tour such as that, jackets and clothing are part of that process. In this particular case I don't know that I would agree that that money was well spent. In fact, if it was to be brought up to me, I probably wouldn't approve that as an expense now. [interjections] It's always easy to look at things in hindsight and say: is that the most appropriate way to spend money? It's much harder to do it at the time.

2:00

The Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, I'm struggling a bit to hear the questions and the answers, so if you'd please keep it down, I'd appreciate it.

Final supplemental.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, any Albertan can log on to the web page of almost any government MLA and see them proudly wearing their taxpayer-paid-for Building Alberta promotional jackets. They'll also find an interesting assortment of defeated PC MLAs wearing them as well like Ray Danyluk and Luke Ouellette. The PC Party should pay this money back. Or does the Premier honestly think it's appropriate to use taxpayer money to buy jackets for failed PC candidates? Really? Really?

Mr. Hancock: If that was what was being done, it would be wrong, but that's not what was done. In fact, there are proud mayors and reeves around the province also wearing the jackets, as I understand it, proud participants of the tour wearing those jackets, as I understand it. There are some 200 of them. There are not that many failed PC candidates in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the Liberal opposition, followed by the leader of the ND opposition. [interjections] The hon. leader of the Liberal opposition. Second call.

Health Facilities Infrastructure

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The deferred maintenance tab for Alberta's health facilities is close to \$1 billion, yet the province is committing only \$70 million to address this. The Misericordia hospital board wrote to the Minister of Health asking for \$33 million to address critical maintenance issues. They got only \$19 million. Our hospitals have suffered 20 years of neglect, during which the Premier was in cabinet, and he even served as

Health minister. To the Premier: how did you allow this happen, and why are continuing to allow this to happen?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question. You know, we work with Alberta Health Services on maintenance. We work with school boards. On government buildings we do that ourselves. It's always a value judgment because you can only spend each dollar once. The hon. member might want to write that piece down. When we spend each dollar once, we have to decide whether it's for something new or to fix something that's already there. It's always a tough decision. We make plans every year. We increase our budgets for maintenance every year. I would remind him also that 95 per cent of the schools, hospitals, and postsecondaries are in good or fair condition. We intend to keep them that way.

Dr. Sherman: It's quite clear that their value judgment is that where our children are sick and elderly are kept, they want to let those buildings get rundown.

The Minister of Health is stuck in bureaucratic planning cycles instead of planning construction cycles, which is what the Misericordia hospital needs, to get building. The Misericordia needs replacing, not \$19 million worth of temporary repairs, barely enough to fix the plumbing, keep the lights on, and stop the roof from leaking let alone look after sick patients. To the Premier: are there plans to replace the Misericordia, and if so, where is it on the priority list?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, we work, again, with Alberta Health Services. They worked with the Health ministry and with our ministry to deliver those new maintenance programs. Again, it's a matter of balance. It always has been and always will be. When the agencies identify something that needs to be fixed, it goes in the budget. The fact is that not unlike an Alberta family, you don't put in a new furnace every year; you plan on putting it in when the furnace fails. If you can squeeze 25 years out of it, you try to, and when it fails, you fix it. On the other hand, there are planned things that you do on a schedule. It's a combination.

Dr. Sherman: It's quite clear that there's no plan and there's no priority list. That's what I heard.

Like the rest of the province, west Edmonton is growing rapidly, and the Misericordia hospital staff and administrators continue to do a great job despite severe underfunding for front-line care and hospital maintenance and renovations. The Health minister said that this government is well into the planning process for a new hospital in the Capital health region. To the Premier. What the folks in the west end want to know is: will you build a new Misericordia hospital? If so, when, and if not, why not?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, if this hon. member had been listening, he would have heard the Minister of Health respond to that question a number of times over the last couple of weeks. The hon. member raised in his first question that I've been here 17 years while it deteriorates. Well, it seems to me that he's been here for six years, and this is the first time he's raised the issue in the Legislature, so I'm wondering where his priorities have been.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the ND opposition.

Political Party Leadership Campaign Financing

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, here we go again. Another day, another Tory leadership race. Under this government's legislation there is no maximum limit on how much an individual or a corporation can donate to a leadership candidate. To the Premier: will he amend the law to impose the same limits on leadership donations as presently exist for election campaigns, and if not, why not?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, as you've said a number of times, internal party matters are matters for the parties. I do believe, though, that this province is one of the few jurisdictions in the country that actually has leadership rules in our Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act. I think we're leading the country in openness and transparency with respect to how leadership races are financed.

The Speaker: The administration and enforcement falls within the Chief Electoral Officer's purview; however, amendments, if you wish any, are the purview of this House.

Carry on. First supplemental.

Mr. Mason: Well, thank you very much. The Premier talks out of both sides of his mouth. He says on the one hand, "Oh, this is an internal party matter," and then he says: "Oh, but guess what? We've legislated." But what you haven't legislated, Mr. Premier, are any limits on how much someone can donate. What's to stop someone like Daryl Katz making a \$400,000 donation to some candidate that's going to support his hundred million dollar demand for his hockey palace? How are you going to stop that, Mr. Premier?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the fact that all donations have to be published above a certain amount, a fact that we've included in the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act, I think, makes it clear to any candidate that's in a leadership race in any party that they had better be circumspect about how they do their finances because if they're not, it will affect their ability to have longevity in office.

The Speaker: Again, hon. member, the actual administration of the act and the enforcement of it, which is where I think you're going, are not the purview of the government. They're the purview of the Chief Electoral Officer. Amendments, if any, if that's how you wish to recraft your question, will be up to you.

Mr. Mason: I'm asking for amendments to legislation.

Mr. Speaker, we all know the PCs are the party of big money. It sure looks like the Premier wants to keep it that way. Big money buys big influence. My question is to the Premier. Why are you unwilling to legislate an end to the corrosive effect of big money on politics in Alberta?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member makes a challenge or an assumption that's really not warranted. There is absolutely no evidence that big money has anything to do with good governance in this province. In fact, this government over the years has enjoyed the support of Albertans from right across the spectrum and from right across the province. That, indeed, has been the success of this government over the years, that we truly represent all corners of the province and all people in the province. That's how you get success. It has nothing to do with how much money you have.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. members.

No more preambles now. The first five main sets of questions have gone. Let's move on to Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, followed by Airdrie.

Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women

Mr. Allen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tomorrow I'll be taking part in a round-table for missing and murdered aboriginal women in Fort McMurray. The discussion has been put together in response to the decision by the federal government to not research the disproportionately high number of missing and murdered aboriginal women and girls in Canada. Aboriginal women are much more likely to be murdered by strangers, and the murderers of aboriginal women are much less likely to be convicted. The round-table in Fort McMurray will also include friends and family members of these women. To the Minister of Aboriginal Relations: are there currently any statistics for aboriginal women that may have been murdered or have gone missing in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Relations. Anyone wish to respond? The Minister of Aboriginal Relations, second call.

Mr. Oberle: I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker. I missed the question entirely. I understand the member is interested in the conference that's taking place on missing and murdered aboriginal women. He'll know that our government has advocated with the federal government for an inquiry into the situation of missing and murdered aboriginal women in our country.

Mr. Allen: Well, I'm not sure if these are a moot point. To the same minister: does the provincial government have a position as far as the necessity to investigate? I will assume that's your answer, Minister.

Mr. Oberle: We do, Mr. Speaker. As I've said, we have already advocated with the federal government. We've joined fellow ministers and premiers across the country in doing so. The importance of moving forward and answering some of these questions was also discussed as part of the Truth and Reconciliation commission.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. Allen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll forego my second supplemental.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Let's move on.

Provincial Budget

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance has called the Wildrose everything from ignorant to deceptive in our criticism of his new budget accounting methods, which ignore capital spending when calculating the size of the provincial deficit. The problem is that Alberta's most respected former Finance minister, Jim Dinning, agrees with us, stating that Alberta must "return to the simple and clear accounting rules used to get our government back in the black," meaning that "we should be able to understand the government's books." Minister, is Jim Dinning also ignorant and deceptive in his critique of your budgeting methods?

2:10

Mr. Horner: No, Mr. Speaker. Only the Wildrose Alliance is doing that. Mr. Dinning was one of the 75 CEOs and executives that we actually interviewed back in 2012, I believe it was, when we talked about the idea of following the municipal governance that is within our province and across the country of separating operating from capital. In the notes – and I actually went back and referred to those notes of the meeting – Mr. Dinning agreed that that would be a good thing to do as did Mr. Lougheed at the time. As well, Mr. Speaker, I asked Mr. Dinning: did he think it was wise, if it made financial sense, to use the capital markets to amortize long-term assets over their useful life? He said yes.

Mr. Anderson: So I guess Mr. Dinning is now a liar, too. That's interesting.

Mr. Dinning went further. He decried this PC government's decision to borrow \$21 billion by 2016, stating, "Albertans sacrificed a lot to have a debt-free future. We don't want that hard work put at risk." Minister, now that the former Premier is gone, will you commit to follow Mr. Dinning's sage advice, put a halt to debt financing, and do what any competent Finance minister would be able to do with \$44 billion at his disposal, and that's build what Albertans need without plunging us and our kids back into debt?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I find it interesting that the hon. members are not telling Albertans what they would defer. As to the Leader of the Opposition's comment about how they would balance the budget, they would defer the capital spending. So I would ask them: which school are they not going to build, which road are they not going to build, which hospital are they not going to build? How much damage to the economy are they going to do before they realize that it was the wrong thing to do? The chair of the Alberta Chambers of Commerce agrees with what we're doing. The University of Toronto's public policy agrees with what we're doing. Standard & Poor's agrees with it. I could go on and on.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Mr. Anderson: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Finance minister is doing a great job of auditioning for opposition. Well done.

Minister, given that virtually every former PC Finance minister – every one – from Mr. Dinning to Dr. Morton to Mr. Snelgrove to Dr. Oberg, all of them, have said that your new accounting methods are confusing, they are misguided, and that your decision to plunge our province deep into debt is equally wrong, Minister, will you please stop with the "everyone's lost but me" attitude, stop going into debt, and publish a budget that you don't need the Rosetta stone to understand?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's interesting that when I go around the province and I have town halls and public meetings and I describe what our income statement is and what our balance sheet is, Albertans understand, including the Edmonton Chamber of Commerce, which believes that this budget is a balanced budget with a reasonable revenue forecast, reduction of growth in operating expenses, the redirection of some revenues into savings, and the use of strategic debt to invest in infrastructure. Standard & Poor's: "The province's financial management is very positive, in our view. Budget information is comprehensive and detailed." These are the people that are taking information from our documents and giving us our credit rating. I think they know what they're talking about.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by Chestermere-Rocky View.

Edmonton's Elevate Report

Mr. Dorward: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The 2012 Elevate report prepared by the city of Edmonton comments that the city and its citizens must work together to create strong and sustainable neighbourhoods and communities. The report defines mature neighbourhoods, and from Avonmore to Gold Bar all communities, all neighbourhoods in my constituency are mature. This report highlights the findings of the Community Sustainability Task Force and offers recommendations in order to mitigate the issues challenging these types of communities. To the Acting Minister of Municipal Affairs: is your department aware of this report and its findings?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to tell the member that, yes, I have seen the Elevate report, and it's extremely well done. The city of Edmonton brought stakeholders from across the community together to look at community sustainability, especially in older neighbourhoods that are well developed. But I can promise this, Member, that we will continue to work with the city of Edmonton and all our municipalities to ensure that they have the ability to meet local needs and create the infrastructure that they need into the future.

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Mr. Dorward: Thank you. To the same minister: can you give me some feeling that the findings of the Elevate report will influence decisions that you're making in the future?

Mr. Weadick: Well, that's a really good question. Mr. Speaker, upon reading the report, I noticed that many of the issues that came up would be consistent with many municipalities across the province, whether they be large municipalities or small municipalities, and I believe that this report could create some of the issues that the city of Edmonton may want to bring forward as we talk about the MGA review, looking at what things may need to be changed to ensure we have sustainable municipalities into the future.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Mr. Dorward: Mr. Speaker, one of the groups that's mentioned in the report is the school boards and schools. To the Minister of Education: do we take mature neighbourhood status into account when considering innovative ways to provide capital and fund the education of our youth in these mature areas?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to commend the member for being such a strong advocate for his community. I know he's been very involved in the open houses and the dialogues that Edmonton Catholic has had with respect to some of his schools in mature neighbourhoods. The shorter answer is that, yes, we do. But, really, we rely on the school boards – I mean, they're the locally, duly elected folks – to make those decisions. They put their capital plans together, and we decide which projects across the province to fund. But it's up to the school boards to decide, you know, what kinds of partnerships and the innovative solutions that the local community may have with respect to any particular project.

Educational Curriculum Redesign

Mr. McAllister: Mr. Speaker, hundreds of Alberta parents and their children stood in the cold this weekend rallying for changes to the math curriculum, and I proudly stood with them. A petition calling on the Minister of Education to reinstate the basics back into the curriculum has now reached 13,000. Parents want Alberta Education to provide teachers with a textbook or a math program that emphasizes the tried-and-true, tested methods of mathematics. They want their kids to focus on and to master standard algorithms, vertical addition and subtraction. Will the minister commit to making that the primary focus, and if so, how?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to emphasize once again that the basics were never gone. I think that if you're looking for evidence that there's a problem with numeracy in Alberta, you can just look across the aisle. To say that there were hundreds of people at that rally this weekend is a bit of a stretch, just like to say that our math scores have dropped 32 per cent, which is what the member said not too long ago, is a bit of a stretch because, actually, they dropped two and a half per cent over the last three years. The reality is that they don't want us to teach problem solving. They don't want us to teach 21st century skills. They just want us to teach basics. We think that we need to learn both.

Mr. McAllister: Those are the minister's words, and they are inaccurate, Mr. Speaker.

Given that yesterday the Deputy Minister of Education defended the new math philosophy, stating, "With all due respect, mathematicians and math profs [are] not the best advisors on math pedagogy" – now, I know there are some consultants here today, and that's good. You should be well rounded. But it is troubling. Minister, don't you find it troubling that you don't go to math experts for advice on mathematics?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, we absolutely do go to math experts for advice, and we do go to experts on pedagogy. We go beyond that. We go right across the world to see what leading jurisdictions are doing, those that are performing better than us on international tests and are advancing their scores. We go to businesses and the business leaders across the country, and they're telling us that the basics are important but so is problem solving, so are the 21st century skills and the soft skills. These folks don't agree with that. They want us just to revert back in time to the basics. We think that we need to progress and do a better job of teaching both.

Mr. McAllister: You should teach both, and you should focus on the basics for our children.

Now, given that Manitoba just went through this very same thing, Mr. Speaker, and given that their government did the right thing, reinstated a focus on the fundamentals as their primary teaching strategy – they listened and did the right thing for our kids. Minister, stop the polarizing of this issue. Will you do the right thing for our kids and focus on the fundamentals?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, who's polarizing here? They asked us some time ago to promise to make the basics emphasized in the new curriculum. I said that, yes, we would. It's in *Hansard*, March 4. I said: yes, we would. We've said yes, yes, yes so many times that they can't take yes for an answer. We agree that the basics are important. It's already in the curriculum. We've also agreed with some of the parents and groups that are concerned. We're going to re-emphasize that in September, and we're going to make it an emphasis of the new curriculum that we're working on. But we

also agree with world-leading experts. We believe and we agree with business leaders that the soft skills and problem solving are also important.

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

2:20 School Codes of Conduct

Mr. Hehr: Thank you. Last week I asked about the Heritage Christian Academy. Today it's about the Prairie Christian Academy, a fully funded public school which makes staff sign a professional ethical standards document that requires them to – get this, Mr. Speaker – uphold the sanctity of marriage, defined as that between a man and a woman, and abstain from homosexual relations. To the minister: 15 years after the Supreme Court of Canada stated that this practice is against the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Humans Rights Act, why is this still happening?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, we were also extremely concerned when the reports came out this weekend. Obviously, I want to be clear that we don't tolerate any discrimination or any bullying in any of our schools for any reason, and that goes for staff or students. We want to make sure that all the operations in our schools fully comply with provincial legislation. That means the Education Act and the Human Rights Act, and we're taking steps to make sure that that's the case.

Mr. Hehr: Well, Mr. Speaker, over the course of my time as critic I've repeatedly brought examples of these violations of the Charter and the Human Rights Act. Given the frequency, Mr. Minister, does your ministry approve of these policies, or do you just turn a blind eye to the practice of what is actually happening here in Alberta? It happens all the time.

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, this member doesn't believe in choice, he doesn't believe in giving parents choice with respect to different schools, and he doesn't believe in us funding that education. So he would like to wipe and smear every private school, every charter school, every alternative program with the same brush because we've got an issue in a few. Let's deal with the issue in the few, and we're going to do that. We've told the department that we want them to review all the master agreements between alternative programs and school boards and all the employment agreements to make sure that they're complying with provincial legislation.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, you had two points of order, one at 2:21 and one at 2:21 and a half or so. We'll deal with them shortly. Thank you.

Mr. Hehr: What I do believe is that all schools in this province should be subject to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights Act and that no one should be discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation. It appears that this minister really doesn't care that much about it. Given this information that has come out today and this weekend, can you not now see the need for us to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered kids in schools across this province where this type of attitude exists and make their lives better with this legislation to be made mandatory? Will you not do things to make . . .

The Speaker: Thank you.

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, I agree. Yes, I agree with the member, and we're doing things every day to make kids' lives better. We want to make sure that not only that segment of the population is protected but every segment of the population, not just our students but also our staff. We have those provincial legislations. They should be enforced. We're taking steps to make sure the ministry is going to look at this very closely. We've also got a regulatory review committee that doesn't have its final report back. They're going to be tasked to have a close look at this to make sure that if there are any regulations that we need to put in place, they give us assurances that these provincial legislations are being enforced. Then we'll do that, too.

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, this Education minister capitulated to right-wing, special-interest groups and the Wildrose and removed the protections of the Human Rights Act and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms from the Education Act. The minister just said that he doesn't tolerate discrimination of any kind in schools. To the Minister of Education: then why did you remove it?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, let's be really clear about what section 11 of the Human Rights Act is about. It's about parental rights. There was a time in the history of this country and in the history of this province when parental rights with respect to education were not respected, and we spent a day last week lamenting that dark period in Alberta's history. The government knows better than the parent with respect to making choices for the education of their children: we don't believe that. Obviously, we've got some strict standards. We've got some great legislation to protect human rights. Those things are in place, and they supersede the Education Act and other things that are out there. But parental rights and parental choice are important, too.

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, human rights are being trampled.

Given that we have at least two examples of schools blatantly violating human rights that are enshrined in the Canadian Charter and given that schools are openly discriminating against vulnerable youth and teachers by requiring them to sign unconstitutional codes of conduct, to the same minister: why are you allowing publicly funded schools and school boards to violate the Charter rights of their students and staff and discriminate against them?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, we're not allowing anything. We do devolve a lot of authority to school boards. They're duly elected trustees of the system, and they manage the operations. They manage those employment agreements and so forth, and they should. If circumstances come to light like we've recently been made aware of, we're going to look into those, and we're going to address those. There's provincial legislation and national legislation to protect people, and we're going to make sure that's enforced.

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, given that because this PC government succumbed to pressure from the Wildrose and special-interest groups, students can be expelled for exercising their constitutionally protected rights and given that as Minister of Education it's your responsibility to ensure that all students can go to school free from bullying and discrimination, will you stop making offensive excuses and commit to ensuring that constitutional human rights are protected in publicly funded schools, and if not, why not?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, I think it's only the NDP that view parents as a special-interest group. I think that what I've just said here over the last several questions is affirmation that we are

committed to the Human Rights Act in Alberta. It is affirmation that we are committed, if you look at the Education Act in Alberta and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We're going to work with our school boards and everyone who's funded by this province to deliver education to make sure that those pieces of legislation are being adhered to.

AISH Wait Times

Mrs. Towle: My questions today will be on behalf of vulnerable Albertans. Last week at budget estimates for Human Services we learned that the wait time for an AISH application sits at three to four months. This is apparently due to over 50 applications being received each and every day. According to the minister approximately 50 per cent of AISH applications, or about 9,000 cases per year, are denied, and of those that are denied, there is an additional five-month wait time to hear the appeal. Minister, how is it even remotely acceptable for any Albertan applying for AISH to wait for nine months to a year for their application to be processed and/or appealed?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The member raises a valid point. The fact is that since 2012, when AISH rates were increased, the sheer volume of applications has gone up very, very significantly, with some estimates of an over 80 per cent increase in applications. What we have to do is make sure that while we reduce processing times, which we have done – we've made some progress on that, down to 15 weeks. We have more work to do. In addition, we've appointed new members to appeal panels that will attempt to clear up the backlog in that area.

Mrs. Towle: Given that the increase in AISH applications is not a surprise and the minister is able to foresee an additional increase in the workload to handle these appeals, can the minister tell Albertans exactly how many additional new members, not replacement members, have been appointed to the citizens' review panel to deal with these AISH application wait times?

Mr. Bhullar: Mr. Speaker, I believe the number is 53 new members; 53 new members from across the province have been added to the AISH appeal panels. In addition to that, additional sitting days have been instituted so that we can try to clean up the backlog as quickly as possible to make sure people can get results as quickly as possible.

Mrs. Towle: Given that there is a 5 per cent budget increase to the Ministry of Human Services yet the only increase in staff is two full-time equivalents, which are only in the minister's own office, can the minister explain how hiring political staff in his own office is more important than hiring front-line staff who are trying to help vulnerable Albertans?

Mr. Bhullar: Mr. Speaker, we spoke about that issue at length. It's not entirely accurate, but we'll let bygones be bygones for today. It's Monday. The fact is that we have a series of new applications. It's very important that we support vulnerable Albertans. That's why this government, on this side of the House, increased AISH by \$400, to make sure that it is the most supportive program in this country.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, followed by Little Bow.

Promotion of Alberta Energy Industry

Ms Fenske: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship tabled its final report on the review of the monetization of natural gas in Alberta. As an advocate for Alberta's Industrial Heartland, currently Canada's largest petrochemical processing region, there is a recommendation of great interest to the area. Knowing that the heartland's economic growth means economic growth for Alberta, to the Minister of Innovation and Advanced Education: what is being done to make Alberta an even more attractive place for value-added companies?

The Speaker: The hon. minister and Premier.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a very important question for all Albertans because we have a policy that, for example, calls for 66 per cent of our bitumen to be upgraded here at home and 50 per cent of that going upstream. We also have an ethane policy. What we need to do is make sure that the foundations are there for business to be able to engage right here. Innovation and Advanced Education works with Energy, works with other departments in government to develop those policy frameworks, and works with industry to make sure that those policy frameworks will be workable for them so that they can do their business here.

2:30

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Ms Fenske: Thank you. To the Minister of Energy: given that time is of the essence when these companies are deciding where to set up shop, what can we expect with respect to a policy decision on the report, and how long will it take to implement those recommendations?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Time is of the essence. A lot of times when businesses are looking at the opportunities that they might have, their time frame is finite, so they want to work closely with our departments to understand what policy frameworks are in place, and we need to work with them to make sure that our policy development results in policies that actually work for industry and for Albertans. We try to do that on a timely basis. We're working with Energy and with other departments to make sure that that can happen, and it is happening for Albertans.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Ms Fenske: Thank you. My final question is to the hon. Minister of Transportation. Given the industrial traffic that commutes through Fort Saskatchewan, my constituency is looking for a heavy-load bridge. Can we expect one in the near future?

Mr. Drysdale: Mr. Speaker, currently there are three heavy-haul bridges across the North Saskatchewan River – Vinca, Waskatenau, and Duvernay – that support development in northeast Alberta. It is expected that the completion of the northeast leg of the Anthony Henday, to be completed in 2016, also will provide two new bridges with seven lanes across the North Saskatchewan River. This will help the congestion on highway 15 at the crossing of Fort Saskatchewan. It will also help with the movement of people, goods, and services in and around the northeast part of the capital region.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Little Bow, followed by Calgary-Cross.

Rural Flood Damage Payments

Mr. Donovan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On October 30 I raised a question about Jeff Callahan, a local farmer near High River who had flood damage in the June flood. The former Municipal Affairs minister explained that his crop loss should be covered through the emergency management incurred costs, which at that time we were all happy with. It looked like we had the problem solved. But then we found out that nobody was taking responsibility for who pumped the water on those said lands. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Someone paid for those pumps to run on this farmer's land. Why won't they pay for the damage they caused?

The Speaker: The hon. associate minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank this member for this question. I think it really highlights one of the issues that we haven't talked a lot about, and that is some of the damage done during the flood in rural Alberta. You know, we lost something like 30 municipal water-pumping systems, and we did have farmland damage. It was a major event. The DRP does cover input costs like fertilizer and those sorts of things on land that has been damaged by overland flooding.

Mr. Donovan: Mr. Speaker, part of the problem here is that it wasn't just overland flooding. It was the fact that the local municipality kept pumping water onto this land into August. It damaged the land. It made it muddy. It made it where the combines have been stuck during harvest time. When can this farmer and other farmers around him expect the MD or the government to take responsibility and find a solution to actually pay for the loss and the damages due to the value of it?

The Speaker: The hon. associate minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would not want to speak on behalf of the county that did the pumping. I'm sure that the member can sit down and work with them as he is a ratepayer of theirs. We always try to help find solutions to these very important cases. Any damage caused by the overland flooding portion is covered by the DRP for the input costs only, not for loss of crop.

Thank you.

Mr. Donovan: Well, Mr. Speaker, I find it kind of interesting because the MD of Bighorn, I believe, paid \$1.2 million or \$1.7 million for rocks from Lafarge, that Lafarge billed the DRP for, which, it was obviously laid out, was worth more than the rock value at the time. Can the minister tell me how Lafarge can get paid for extra value on their rocks, yet my farmers are expected to just take the loss?

The Speaker: The hon. associate minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't know the value of the rocks that Lafarge was selling or who was using it, but I do know that we're concerned about the farmers in the south and some of the damage that they incurred. We'll continue to work with these landowners. For any of the landowners that do feel that the DRP process didn't work for them, there is an appeal process in place. We would ask them to go ahead with that for any

of the damages caused by overland flooding, and the DRP will treat them fairly.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Cross, followed by Lacombe-Ponoka.

Student Employment Supports

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today is the last day of classes for postsecondary students, and tomorrow thousands of students will be out looking for summer jobs. It will be difficult to find employment because we know that the unemployment rate for youth is twice that for the general population. I can tell you that students remain very upset that the summer temporary employment program, in place for over 40 years, was cancelled last year. My question is to the Minister of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour: why was the STEP program cancelled when it provided 3,000 jobs a year for students?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, the program, that at that time was administered by the Ministry of Human Services, was indeed cancelled. It was a very difficult decision, I imagine, for the ministry and for the entire government as it was made at a time of fiscal restraint. At the same time, I have to tell you that we found that there was a better way of allocating these dollars for students to allow them not only a job during summertime but much more practical and relevant experience. So stay tuned in the future.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: does that mean that you will commit to students, nonprofit organizations, and businesses that the STEP program will be reinstated in time for them to access it this spring?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I have given direction to my department to look at the program. One of the weaknesses found in the last program was that students were not finding employment in areas that were actually relevant to their studies, so we're hoping to give a triple benefit: give students jobs, give them relevant experience during the summertime on the job, and allow businesses and not-for-profit agencies to benefit from the wisdom that these students will be bringing from the classroom into those offices and places of employment. We are committed to it, and our departments are working on putting a much better program in place.

Mrs. Fritz: That is good news, Mr. Speaker, because what I hear the minister saying is that you will lift the suspension and reinstate the program that was suspended in 2013. My question is: how and when will you communicate this new program to the students and the nonprofit organizations and businesses?

The Speaker: Thank you.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, what I'm saying is that we will do better than that. We will not lift the suspension, but we are in the process of designing a much better STEP program, which probably will be known by a different name, a program that will actually meet not only the employment needs of our students, even though at this time we know that employment is ample in this province, but will give them, more importantly, related experience in the area of their study and, by doing so, also benefit the businesses. So stay tuned. Our departments are working on this. It's a crossministerial initiative. We know it's very important to our students and business sector.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka, followed by Dunvegan-Central-Peace-Notley.

Lung Cancer Diagnosis and Treatment

Mr. Fox: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2011 Alberta Health Services announced that it would open new rapid-access clinics in both Calgary and Edmonton to co-ordinate lung cancer assessment, testing, and treatment for people around the province. AHS said that once these clinics were fully functional, they would treat 4,000 patients per year. We were told these clinics would dramatically reduce wait times across the province and that central Albertans would benefit, yet here we are in 2014 and wait times for lung cancer treatment in Alberta are by far the longest in the country. To the Health minister: why have these clinics failed to deliver the results that Albertans were promised?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is nothing more important than making sure that when Albertans have a health issue, they have access to the services they need. That's why this government has made huge commitments right across this province, particularly on cancer care, with the cancer corridor and with moving out treatment right across the province. I know that the Minister of Health has talked a number of times about the plans in place to reduce wait times, and that work is happening as we speak.

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Mr. Fox: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that these rapid-access clinics were supposed to result in Albertans accessing lung cancer surgery in 60 days or less from the time of booking yet three years later most Albertans are waiting close to 90 days to access this life-saving procedure, can the associate minister of Health tell us what specifically he is doing now to get these wait times under control?

Mr. McIver: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for the question. I can tell him that in the last couple of weeks I have been through the Cross Cancer hospital in Edmonton and through the Tom Baker in Calgary just last Friday. I want the hon. member to know this government takes that seriously. I spent some serious time with the people that are in charge of the cancer care system here in Alberta. They are making the point that we deliver a great quality of service here, that we need to keep investing and that we need to expand the system.

2:40

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. Fox: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the wait times in central Alberta to see a medical oncologist from the date of referral to the first consult is by far the highest in the province at 7.3 weeks and given that the benchmark in the province is four weeks, can the associate minister of Health please explain this failure to my constituents and the constituents in central Alberta?

Mr. Quest: Mr. Speaker, we're always conscious of wait times in this province, especially with something as critical as oncology. AHS will be targeting these areas. We know that we've got some wait times that are slightly longer in some areas of the province than others in this country, but we are working on that. We also have to remember that central Alberta along with many other areas in this province is growing at a very, very rapid rate.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The time for question period has expired. In 30 seconds from now we will continue with Members' Statements, beginning with Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Thank you.

Members' Statements

(continued)

The Speaker: Hon. members, let us proceed, then, with the hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, followed by Calgary-Cross.

Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village

Ms Fenske: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bitamo, welcome, a phrase you will hear quite often at the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village, which opened in 1974. It's 40 years young this year, and the village will welcome guests beginning May 17 for this season. It's open daily throughout the summer from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. until Monday, September 1, with the addition of the Harvest of the Past Festival on September 7. The site is located 45 minutes east of Edmonton in Lamont county. The village re-creates with historical authenticity the settlement of Ukrainian immigrants to the area from 1899 to 1930.

The site is hosting some notable festivals this year. On May 19 is the Celebration of Dance, Alberta's largest Ukrainian dance extravaganza. On June 14, a very special festival, the village is proud to collaborate with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra to present Symphony at the Village. This live concert in the meadow will feature a collection of Ukrainian-inspired music and traditional family favourites. It's a significant first for the village. On June 29 a special display of historic vehicles is part of Vintage Day. On August 10 a celebration of Alberta's vibrant Ukrainian community past and present is co-hosted by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress. On August 24 Friends of the Ukrainian Village Society present Music Fest 2014. The season wraps up with a harvest of the past, a re-creation of an old-fashioned threshing bee.

Family-friendly activities are found throughout the historic village. Horse-drawn wagon rides, traditional Ukrainian food, and costumed role players will make your visit memorable. It's a Zabava all summer long. Bring the family out to enjoy the party and celebrate this great history.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Agrium Western Event Centre

Mrs. Fritz: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to advise that an exciting new facility for the exhibition, competition, and display of animals is being constructed for Albertans by the Calgary Stampede. It will be the only facility of its kind in Canada. The Agrium Western Event Centre is near completion and is designed to have an essential role in making the Calgary Stampede a year-round gathering place.

This concept is new, and it is critically important. The centre will connect urban and rural communities, and it will host an engaging, globally focused educational program.

This beautiful \$60 million facility includes a show floor with seating for 2,500 people, a 20,000-square-foot multipurpose hall, and an outstanding 8,000-square-foot rotunda.

The Agrium Western Event Centre will be the new home for western equine events at Stampede Park, hosting both regional

and international competitions, exhibitions, and trade shows. Four events have already signed multiyear agreements with the Stampede to host their major shows and competitions there. The centre will also promote how agriculture changes lives around the world, emphasizing the sustainability concept of food supplies. The building's magnificent rotunda will also be the home of journey 2050, which is a unique educational program for junior high school aged children. They will be empowered to make decisions and have fun exploring the challenge of sustainably feeding the world in 2050.

Mr. Speaker, as a director of the Calgary Stampede board I'd ask that you and members of the Assembly join me in acknowledging and thanking the governments of Alberta and Canada for their matching contributions along with Agrium and the private donors and the Calgary Stampede board, staff, and volunteers for creating an outstanding, world-class Agrium Western Event Centre.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, leader of the Liberal opposition.

Public Service Pensions

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the years since the cowboys on Wall Street crashed the world economy, there have been repeated attacks on public-sector pensions by right-wing elected officials across the world. We've seen this in the U.S., and we've seen this in Alberta. In fact, we've seen this Conservative government pass two bills, Bill 45 and Bill 46, that contravene the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the ability of front-line workers to assemble, and the ability of Albertans to even speak freely about striking, one of the most fundamental rights, freedom of speech, in this country.

The fact of the matter is that public servants built this great country. Our civil service is run by some of the hardest working, best public servants. Our public school system is run by very good public servants and teachers and support staff. Our health system is run by the very heroes who look after the patients: the unit clerks, the cleaning staff, the nurses, the LPNs, respiratory therapists, the paramedics. Public servants stay on call 24 hours a day, while we sleep, to protect us, from our police officers to our firefighters to our paramedics. Mr. Speaker, I think you can agree with me on that. The question is: why would this government attack the rights and freedoms of the very people who built this province and this country?

Mr. Speaker, I want to talk about pensions. The public service pensions allow those people, those very heroes who built our province, to live their lives with some dignity, some dignity so they can pay their bills, which are pretty high in this province, so they can buy their grandkids some toys, and look after themselves. The Alberta Liberals stand here in support of public-sector workers.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by Calgary-Mountain View.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to table this document written by Dr. Charles Boulet, entitled

Debunked. He gives reasons why Bill 203 should be supported. He says, "For too many children, visual impediments are a burden they cannot describe, let alone fix, but they interfere with behaviour and learning. This bears tremendous costs to school boards and health care."

My next tabling is a document written by Dr. Steven Hoang. Dr. Hoang is from Calgary, and he is an optometrist. He says that he graduated with his doctor of optometry in 2013 and that in the eight months that he has been practising, he has

already seen first hand the number of children with undiagnosed refractive error, eye alignment disorders, and ocular disease. The age range of kids I see for their first ever eye exam ranges from 6 months to 18 years old. The majority of their decreased visual performance are corrected by a simple pair of glasses.

2:50

My next tabling, Mr. Speaker, is a document from the Eye Physicians and Surgeons Association of Alberta. They're the experts on the eye, and they're part of the Canadian Ophthalmological Society. They fully support enhanced vision screening designed to capture and treat eye health problems in as many affected children as possible, but they're concerned about the difference between eye exams and vision screening, which we will be dealing with in Committee of the Whole, if we get that far, with Bill 203.

My last tabling is from a blog on the Internet. It's titled Bill 203, Childhood Vision Assessment Act, and it's in full support of Bill 203.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Swann: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling a review of Childhood Vision Screening in Canada: Public Health Evidence and Practice from the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 2012, where the conclusion indicates that

amblyopia [or weak vision] deserves attention from Public Health. Efforts should be made to maintain existing programs, and provinces without organized screening programs should reconsider their role in the prevention of inequities with regard to preventable blindness in Canadian children.

Thank you.

The Speaker: I believe we have one more, and that's the hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As you're aware, today in question period I referred to some documents that were on the Prairie Christian Academy website in regard to professional and ethical standards that teachers were asked to sign, where it clearly said that "teachers will uphold the sanctity of marriage, defined as that between a man and a woman, and abstain from homosexual relations and sexual relations outside the bonds of marriage." I've also included in my tabling the philosophy of their Christian education.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Are there others?

Hon. members, in a moment I'll deal with the points of order.

Point of Order

Factual Accuracy

The Speaker: The points of order that I have were uttered by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, so let me recognize the hon.

member or someone on her behalf. Hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*, citation, and we'll go from there.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I don't think I have to go on very long about this, which will make you very happy. I'm citing 23(h), (i), and (j) in our rules. Essentially, these say that references cannot make allegations, impute false or unavowed motives, or use abusive or insulting language.

I listened somewhat to the remarks of the hon. Minister of Education. In my view, my questions were directed to legitimate policies of certain schools that have been fully funded as public schools in this province that had references, in my view, to things that were outside of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights Act. It's a legitimate place to bring these up. By no means was I disparaging to them, and by no means did I disparage Catholic schools, which are constitutionally protected in this province and the like. In my view, if you look at the Blues, the minister's response to my question was outside of what my thrust was and what the questions were dealing with. I think he should withdraw those comments and move on from there. The questions asked were about legitimate policy and what the government was going to do about what I saw was a clear violation of what we expect out of our education system here in this province.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Campbell: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'll be very quick. I don't have the Blues in front of me, so I'm not privy to what the exact conversation was. If I remember correctly, the Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* asked his questions, stated his opinion about private schools. The minister got up and gave his opinion and sat down. I don't think that at any point were his remarks disparaging. I don't think he made any allegations against the member. It was just a response to a question that was asked by the member.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Hon. members, I'm at a bit of a disadvantage as well in that I don't have the full Blues of that exchange. What I do have suggests that the Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* did rise at approximately 2:20 p.m. and said words that approximated the following: Mr. Minister, does your ministry approve of these policies, or do you just turn a blind eye to the practice of what is actually happening? It goes on before that, and it goes on after that. We'll have to wait for the official Blues or *Hansard* tomorrow.

In response to that – again, I hope I'm not paraphrasing here – I think the hon. minister stood, that being the Minister of Education, and said something about the hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* doesn't believe in choice and doesn't believe in giving parents the right to choose or words to that effect. We'll just have to wait until the final words come out.

Let me just say this, hon. members. In this House we hear every day people disagreeing with each other about what they say, about what they believe in. We often have two different versions of the same account. We've had the Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* clarify his position. We've had the government member clarify his. I'll review the Blues as well. If there's anything further on this, then I'll raise it again tomorrow. Otherwise, the ruling today stands as a clarification of the points, and we're going to move on with Orders of the Day.

Thank you.

Orders of the Day

Written Questions

[The Clerk read the following written questions, which had been accepted]

Big-city Charter

- Q1. Ms Blakeman:
What progress has been made on the formal commitment to develop a big-city charter, announced by the Minister of Municipal Affairs in a government news release on June 18, 2012?

Property Tax Rates

- Q2. Ms Blakeman:
Which 10 municipalities had the highest property tax rates in Alberta for 2012 and 2013 calendar years?

Child Care Spaces

- Q4. Dr. Swann:
As of January 1, 2014, how many licensed child care program spaces and approved family day home spaces are there in each of Edmonton, Calgary, and the rest of Alberta?

Travel, Meal, and Hospitality Expense Policy

- Q5. Mr. Kang:
Has the government received a report from the Information and Privacy Commissioner on the government's travel, meal, and hospitality expenses policy announced on September 5, 2012, and if so, what are the commissioner's recommendations?

Oil and Gas Pipeline Spills

- Q6. Ms Blakeman:
How many oil and gas pipeline spills, leaks, or ruptures have occurred in Alberta per year from January 1, 2009, to December 31, 2013?

Municipal Flood-prone Lands

- Q10. Ms Blakeman:
Which municipalities in Alberta have lands that are classified as flood prone?

Public-sector Pension Plans

- Q11. Mr. Hehr:
As of January 1, 2014, how many active members and retired members are in each of the following public-sector pension plans: the local authorities pension plan, the public service pension plan, the management employees pension plan, and the special forces pension plan?

English as a Second Language Students

- Q15. Mr. Hehr:
In Alberta how many English as a second language students were registered in each of the school years from 2010-11 to 2012-13 inclusive, and of those, how many will continue beyond the five years that are totally funded by the school board?

Home Inspectors for Resale Properties

- Q16. Mr. Kang:
How many home inspection businesses or individual inspectors for resale properties were operating in Alberta when the home inspection business regulation came into force on September 1, 2011, and how many are operating in Alberta as of January 1, 2014?

Home Inspectors for Resale Properties

- Q17. Mr. Kang:
Since the home inspection business regulation came into force on September 1, 2011, how many complaints has Service Alberta received about home inspection businesses or individual inspectors for resale properties as of January 1, 2014?

Home Inspector Licence Revocation

- Q18. Mr. Kang:
Since the home inspection business regulation came into force on September 1, 2011, how many home inspection businesses or individual inspectors for resale properties have had their licences revoked by Service Alberta as of January 1, 2014?

Children Living in Poverty

- Q19. Dr. Swann:
What criteria does the government use to classify children as living in poverty?

Children Living in Poverty

- Q20. Dr. Swann:
What is the government's estimate of how many Alberta children are living in poverty as of January 1, 2014?

Children Escaping from Poverty

- Q21. Dr. Swann:
What criteria does the government use to determine whether a child has escaped poverty?

Elimination of Child Poverty

- Q22. Dr. Swann:
What is the government's projection of how much money it will need to invest to eliminate child poverty in five years in connection with Together We Raise Tomorrow, Alberta's poverty reduction strategy announced in June 2013, and to which programs, services, and community resources will this funding be allocated?

3:00

Municipal Flood Notice

- Q23. Ms Blakeman:
In relation to the June 2013 flood how many hours' notice did the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development give to each of the affected municipalities that flooding was either possible or imminent?

Evaluation of Flood-proofed Houses

- Q24. Ms Blakeman:
How many safety codes officers in Alberta have been specifically trained to evaluate homes affected by the June

2013 flood and assess whether they have been flood-proofed to a sufficient degree to warrant removal of the notice that the government has placed on the titles to those properties?

Occupational Health and Safety Officers

- Q25. Mr. Hehr:
As of January 1, 2014, how many of the 30 new occupational health and safety, OHS, officers announced by the government on March 4, 2011, have been hired, and what is the total number of OHS officers?

Employment Standards Officers

- Q26. Mr. Hehr:
As of January 1, 2014, how many of the six new employment standards, ES, officers announced by the government on August 10, 2011, have been hired, what is the total number of ES officers, and what was the total number on August 10, 2011?

Family and Community Engagement Councils

- Q27. Dr. Swann:
What is the projected net financial result of dissolving the child and family services authorities and persons with developmental disabilities community boards, establishing family and community engagement councils, and transferring responsibility for service delivery to the Ministry of Human Services?

Alberta Works Caseloads

- Q28. Dr. Swann:
How much have caseloads for Alberta Works decreased or increased from April 1, 2008, to April 1, 2013?

Open Data Portal Visits

- Q29. Mr. Kang:
How many people have visited the Alberta open data portal since it was launched in May 2013, and what was the most searched item?

Government Management Positions

- Q30. Mr. Hehr:
As of January 1, 2014, how many government management positions have been eliminated since April 1, 2013, and how many are anticipated to be eliminated by March 31, 2014?

Disaster Recovery Compensation Notice

- Q31. Ms Blakeman:
For those property owners who received disaster recovery program compensation in 2013, what is the wording of the notice the government will place on the titles to those properties?

Disaster Recovery Committee

- Q32. Ms Blakeman:
Who are the members of the government's Disaster Recovery Committee, the body referenced in section 2.2.2 of the Alberta disaster assistance guidelines and section 7(3) of the disaster recovery regulation?

Disaster Recovery Program, 2013

- Q33. Ms Blakeman:
As of January 1, 2014, how many homes in southern Alberta were deemed or estimated to be eligible to apply for disaster recovery program compensation in relation to the June 2013 flood, and of those, how many submitted applications for compensation, how many were offered compensation, and how many accepted the offered amount of compensation?

Disaster Recovery Program, 2010

- Q34. Ms Blakeman:
As of January 1, 2014, how many disaster recovery program compensation claims from the 2010 flood in southern and central Alberta were appealed to the Minister of Municipal Affairs pursuant to section 8 of the disaster recovery regulation, and how many of those resulted in a reversal or modification of a previous decision made by either the Alberta Emergency Management Agency's director of recovery operations or the managing director?

Disaster Recovery Program, 2013

- Q35. Ms Blakeman:
As of January 1, 2014, of the total number of southern Alberta residents who applied for disaster recovery program compensation in relation to the June 2013 flood, how many have requested a formal review of their files by the Alberta Emergency Management Agency's, AEMA, director of recovery operations, and how many have subsequently requested that a decision on their file by the AEMA director of recovery operations be reviewed by the AEMA managing director pursuant to section 7 of the disaster recovery regulation, and how many have subsequently requested that a decision on their file by the AEMA managing director be reviewed by the Minister of Municipal Affairs pursuant to section 8 of the disaster recovery regulation?

Municipal Requests for Flood Protection Assistance

- Q36. Ms Blakeman:
How many municipalities requested financial or technical assistance from the government for riverbank stabilization or flood protection for the period between the southern Alberta flood that occurred in June 2005 and the flood of June 2013?

Disaster Recovery Program, 2013

- Q37. Ms Blakeman:
As of January 1, 2014, what is the average length of time that it has taken to conclude disaster recovery program compensation claims in relation to the June 2013 flood, and what is the average compensation that has been paid?

Disaster Recovery Program, 2010

- Q38. Ms Blakeman:
As of January 1, 2014, how many disaster recovery program compensation claims are outstanding from the 2010 flood in southern and central Alberta?

Disaster Recovery Program, 2011

- Q39. Ms Blakeman:
As of January 1, 2014, how many disaster recovery program

compensation claims are outstanding from the May 2011 wildfire in Slave Lake?

LandLink Consulting Ltd.

Q40. Ms Blakeman:

What was the commencement date of LandLink Consulting Ltd.'s current five-year contract with the government to administer the province's disaster recovery program?

LandLink Consulting Ltd.

Q41. Ms Blakeman:

What positions did Barry Giffen and Rick Thrall, LandLink Consulting Ltd.'s president and managing partner respectively, hold when they were employed by the government of Alberta?

Full-day Kindergarten Costs

Q3. Mr. Hehr asked that the following question be accepted.

What is the government's projected estimate of the cost to implement full-day kindergarten in Alberta?

Mr. Hehr: I'm going to move Question 3. With Question 3 now moved, I think this has been a long-standing provision in this province. Actually, the former Premier at least at one time promised that she was going to implement this program. I'm not sure if the government still has plans to do so. Nevertheless, it should have some documents where it has estimated the costs of this program. I'm hoping that they can provide it to allow us on the opposition side of the House to establish whether it is in our best interests, whether we have the funds to do so, and assess the relative merits of it going forward against other priorities.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. J. Johnson: Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Government is currently exploring what the best solution for Alberta students will look like in terms of full-day, every day kindergarten. This includes giving consideration for any projected costs. Until this work has concluded, we don't have an estimate of the costs, unfortunately. Alberta Education is continuing to work with our stakeholders to ensure that we find the best solution for the students.

Funding in Alberta ensures that school authorities can provide flexible programs for their students, including children at the preschool level and children with special needs. I can say that currently Alberta Education provides funding to school authorities that offer 475 hours, which is half-day, of early childhood services programming. School authorities have the flexibility to charge a reasonable fee to cover the costs of any additional programming hours. Funding is also available to school authorities for approved early childhood services programs for children with severe disabilities as young as two and a half as well as programming for ESL learners as young as three and a half. We'll continue to fund the collection of the early development instrument, EDI, data to inform early childhood development policy and programming, which is also part of our planning, as well as the infrastructure piece and the professional capacity that we have in this system to deliver full-day K.

We're also collaborating with Human Services and Health to create an inclusive, early years continuum of evidence-informed strategies, which will focus on achieving four common outcomes, and one of those is a healthy start for children. The second is

children realizing their full development potential when they enter school. The third is parents providing nurturing and stable environments for their young children. The fourth outcome is safe, supportive communities for children to learn, grow, and thrive.

Mr. Speaker, as you can see, there's lots of work under way and lots yet to do. We just are not at the position where we have definitive projections of costs for this program even though we are still at this point committed to develop it and to deliver it. Therefore, I move that we reject this question.

Mr. Hehr: Well, that's fair enough if the minister hasn't developed a cost projection for full-day kindergarten. I'm surprised because it has been talked about in this province for some time. Nevertheless, if you don't have it, you don't have it. I'm in support of full-day kindergarten. Many jurisdictions have it. I think it provides a benefit to our kids at an earlier age. My hope is that the minister will develop a cost for this program so then we can talk about it as a more real scenario rather than hoping and wishing.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Written Question 3 lost]

3:10

Heritage Savings Trust Fund

Q7. Mr. Hehr asked that the following question be accepted.

As of January 1, 2014, what is the government's estimate of how much the Alberta heritage savings trust fund would be worth if it had consistently transferred 30 per cent of nonrenewable resource revenue into the fund every year since 1976?

Mr. Hehr: The reason why I ask this question is, I guess, fairly clear. At one point in time it was this long-serving government's mandate, put forward by former Premier Lougheed, that as a principle this should in fact happen. In my view, it was a reasonable public policy piece given that we know that once a barrel of oil is taken out of the ground, you never have that barrel of oil to sell again. So having some of that money transferred into a provincial wealth fund was good public policy. We've seen over the course of time that the government has failed miserably in this regard. In fact, we haven't saved a dime in our heritage trust fund since in 1986, and in fact estimates are that if we had kept up with this, our fund would be very substantial instead of the rather, in my view, limited heritage trust fund we have today.

I think the government would have these statistics and figures readily available to them given that they have the information on how much they have brought in and how much they have saved, and it would highlight to us the importance of getting back on track to Lougheed's vision, in fact, maybe even a vision that would be more conservative, paying for what we use with taxes and saving the oil wealth for the future. In any event, I think that's information the government has or could get relatively easily, and it would allow us to look at what we've done and what we're going to do in the future with the wisdom of this information at our fingertips.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Horner: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government does not prepare calculations of the fund's value under what-if scenarios. Making the 30 per cent assumption would require us to make several other assumptions – you know, "How much did the fund make? What happened in the economy? Where are we going

with the interest rates?" all of those sorts of things – which could've produced a very wide variety of results.

Further, you would have to consider the impact those assumptions would have had on Alberta's fiscal situation at the time given that there were other things going on in the economy. Certainly, in the '80s there were some significant challenges being faced by the government, and certainly in the '90s, Mr. Speaker, there were significant challenges being faced by then Premier Klein and his government. For example, if you set aside 30 per cent of nonrenewable resource revenue every year no matter what, you would have to reduce spending; you would have to increase taxes. I know the hon. member and the party is in that vein, but they'd also have to make changes to the royalty regime to make up the difference.

The idea that Albertans should save is certainly one this government has taken to heart. We passed legislation in this House, Mr. Speaker, last year that would make it mandatory that before we calculated our operating revenue, we had to take savings off the top and put it into the account.

The fact of the matter is that in this budget that we've got before the House today, our savings will grow from \$24 billion today, Mr. Speaker, to \$26 billion, you know, given the financial plan and this three-year business plan. Albertans have told us several times that even in good times and bad times they want us to set some money aside. That means that they wanted to see that legislation. In order for us to continue to do that, it does mean that we're going to be building capital projects using the markets. When you can make 11.6 per cent on your savings and your average debt-servicing costs are around 3 and a half per cent, that makes good financial sense as well.

To say that, you know, we're going to spend a lot of time on what-if scenarios of, "Gee, if it would've been this or it would've been that, what would it be worth?" – what would the federal government have done, Mr. Speaker? We don't know that. I mean, we could've created a considerable target on our backs.

Another thing needs to be answered when they do these comparisons of Norway and these sorts of things come up. Number one, Norway has considerable sales tax, some 20-plus per cent sales tax, and the highest income tax in Europe, probably, Mr. Speaker. They made a conscious decision not to use any nonrenewable resource in their operating, day-to-day expenditures even though they do actually balance their budget every year by drawing from their fund, and it is their pension fund.

The other thing to remember, Mr. Speaker, is that roughly 55 per cent of the economic benefit generated from Albertans' energy resources is actually attributed to the federal government. What if we were to change the assumption and say, "Well, maybe we shouldn't do that"? There are a lot of what-ifs in that kind of a question, frankly. Therefore, we are recommending that this written question be rejected.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's always interesting when you hear the government trying to defend what has happened with our oil and gas revenues and how come there was so little saved over the course of the last 42 years. I think we were treated to another one of those, I guess, apologies for that, in my view, for the not very reasonable amount of savings that is currently found. You know, I'm not on the government side, and I don't have access to these figures, but from what I've gathered, we've taken in over \$375 billion in nonrenewable resource revenue and have only managed to save \$16 billion. At this point

in time we are headed for a \$21 billion debt. I think that if we can't really honestly look at ourselves and provide these numbers and try and get a handle on what we should be doing with our nonrenewable resource revenue, well, that's concerning to me.

Nevertheless, I accept the hon. minister's explanation for what it is and understand that the government is not interested at this time in putting that information out in the light of day.

[Written Question 7 lost]

Debt-servicing Limit

Q8. Mr. Hehr asked that the following question be accepted.

Using the formula in section 6 of the Fiscal Management Act for the calculation of the debt-servicing limit for a fiscal year with respect to outstanding capital borrowing, what is the government's calculation of its debt-servicing limit for the 2013-14 fiscal year, and how much money can the government borrow in the 2013-14 fiscal year before it reaches this debt-servicing limit?

Mr. Hehr: I will say here that this is actually an important piece of knowledge for the opposition to learn because, really, should the government wish to or should the government need to or the like, there's always an ability for the government to borrow money. Now, the government did change our current financing rules from ones that were very clear and very easy to understand and ones that, like we heard about in question period, former Finance minister Jim Dinning preferred and was able to easily calculate what our net position was in terms of debt and revenue. The new rules are, in my view, less clear. You know, I think there are many people who have stated that. I think, honestly, I read in the paper that the hon. Minister of Justice would prefer those old, simple accounting rules again and many other people who would be surprising given that they were formerly part of the government of the day.

Nevertheless, we would have this number in a clear, concise manner for us to understand sort of how this new act works – what the debt-servicing limits are, how it impacts government's ability to go forward, and how it impacts, you know, what our obligations are given that we are headed for a \$21 billion debt by 2016-2017 – and what the triggers are in this act and the like given the substantial changes that have occurred in our financial accounting practices in this province.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

3:20

The Speaker: The hon. President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member is actually referring to section 6 of the Fiscal Management Act, which states:

The debt-servicing costs of the Government for a fiscal year in respect of outstanding capital borrowing must not exceed 3% of the average of the actual operational revenue for the fiscal year and the previous 2 fiscal years.

The hon. member went on at length to talk about how confused he is about the financial statements that are, I guess, currently within the purview of this Legislature in the budget, and I guess it's understandable that if he's that confused, he failed to recognize that the answer to his question is actually in the budget documents for the fiscal year 2014-15.

I would also add, Mr. Speaker, that the limit on debt-servicing costs for 2013-14 is also already available online in the 2013-14 fiscal plan, as are the forecast debt-servicing costs. It is all online.

Mr. Speaker, the other thing that I would add to this commentary is that in 2003, as part of an attempt to move closer to public-sector accounting rules and presentations, we actually went to consolidated financial statements. We actually moved closer to the public-sector accounting rules. Previous ministers of Finance, frankly, didn't probably follow the same standard because we moved to it in 2003. So it is totally understandable that this might be a little different than some of the presentations from the '70s or the '80s or the '90s or perhaps even some of the early 2000s.

I guess I'm having difficulty understanding that the hon. member, as the critic for Finance, would suggest that the public-sector accounting rules are to him confusing and hard to understand. Yet the University of Toronto just recently released a commentary on a report that they did where they actually called on provincial governments to do what municipal governments have been doing for some period of time, and that is to separate capital from operating. They actually called on provincial governments, Mr. Speaker, to be more clear and concise and more detailed in their reporting.

Part of the question the hon. member is asking is about the detail around debt-servicing costs. Mr. Speaker, in previous presentations of our budgets we didn't even allude to those things. We have been borrowing for some period of time. To suggest that we're now going to have additional borrowing, that we might not have had in the past, would be wrong because the \$20 billion that they're referring to also includes P3s. We don't know the balance of P3s to capital debt, what that will be, because we haven't reviewed those projects. P3s are debt, and they have been on our books since somewhere around 2003-2004. To suggest that we're just going into there is some of the misrepresentation that has been presented by the Wildrose Alliance Party and others, I guess.

The other thing that I have to put on the record: to suggest that we're doing this and that there are no other options. There are options. There are options, Mr. Speaker. We've readily admitted that the options we have are to follow the Wildrose platform of not building, deferring the capital into the out-years. That's an option. You wouldn't have to borrow. You'd be able to do some of the capital planning to the out-years, granted. The other option is what the Liberals have asked for, which is to increase the taxes. That's another option. We could increase taxes, generate more revenue, and put cash into long-term assets. No financial expert in today's economy at today's interest rates believes that that's the thing to do.

The option that we chose was to leverage a triple-A credit rating, that is the envy of the world. The option that we chose was to provide taxpayers with value and assets today. We said to them that it will follow four very simple rules. One, it has to be for capital. Two, it cannot exceed the debt-servicing cap, which the hon. member is referring to, which is in the documents, which is online, Mr. Speaker, which is all very, very clear. Three, it has to protect that triple-A credit rating. Four, it has to have a repayment plan, which is also, I would add for all hon. members, in the document called the budget, which we are debating in the House today.

Mr. Speaker, I would reject this question.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo to close debate.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That was a nice story. It doesn't ring true, in my view, on how the long-running government has essentially engaged in a practice of intergenerational theft, which has basically amounted to spending

all the oil wealth in one generation. Really, if there's anything else that they can take credit for, that would be about it, okay? It was a nice story to try and defend that.

Nevertheless, I'll go look for those numbers on the limits on how much debt we can take on in any calendar year, and if it's there, it's there. I stand by my earlier commentary about changing the financial rules. In fact, virtually every Tory Finance minister has stated on the record that this practice is against openness and transparency. In fact, I believe the C.D. Howe Institute stated exactly the same thing, where they said that this government's financial rules and regulations make no sense and that it's sheer and utter obfuscation to suggest otherwise and the like.

Nevertheless, I'll leave it at that and go from there. It is what it is, Mr. Speaker. If the minister says that that information is there, I will go and take a look.

Thank you.

[Written Question 8 lost]

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

Cancer Incidence Rates

Q9. Dr. Swann asked that the following question be accepted. Which 10 municipalities had the highest leukemia, lymphoma, and lung cancer incidence rates in Alberta for each of the years from January 1, 2001, to December 31, 2013?

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is in the interest of looking at the potential for environmental impacts on cancer rates, especially air emissions in this particular set of diseases, and trying to look for any trends across the province in which some communities might be more exposed to coal emissions, to industrial emissions, to refinery emissions, and to sort out any significant trends in cancer rates, those three being the most sensitive indicators to some environmental pollutants.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Minister of Health or someone on behalf of. The hon. Associate Minister of Wellness.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have an amendment to table. Would you like it now, or would you like me to speak to it first?

The Speaker: Now is good.

Hon. members, the associate minister will be moving an amendment, and I wonder if we could just have him read it aloud and then continue with his debate on the amendment. Is that acceptable? It appears it is.

Hon. associate minister, why don't you continue with the amendment, reading it aloud, and, pages, will you distribute the written copy?

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very happy to read it. I have some short comments that will follow. The amendment will read:

Which municipalities in Alberta had the highest leukemia, lymphoma, and lung cancer incidence rates for the period from January 1, 2001, to December 31, 2005, and for the period from January 1, 2006, to December 31, 2011?

I will now give the reasons as to why I trust that this will be acceptable to the House.

I first of all want to thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View for his written question identified in Written Question 9. In the question the hon. member asked, “Which 10 municipalities had the highest leukemia, lymphoma, and lung cancer incidence rates in Alberta for each of the years from January 1, 2001, to December 31, 2013?” Mr. Speaker, the reason for the amendment is that the question cannot be answered as written. The Alberta cancer registry is the only provincial repository for cancer data. However, updating and verifying the data is very complex, and the data for 2012-2013 is not yet available for analysis.

Also, where the case counts or populations are small, the data may become identifiable and compromise a patient’s privacy. Finally, municipal populations and cancer rates vary widely across the province and from year to year, and any instability in numbers may lead to misleading results. That is why years are routinely combined as a means of protecting privacy while also providing reliable information. To protect people’s privacy and to produce meaningful results, it would be necessary to combine the data asked for in Written Question 9 by five-year increments.

That is the reason for the amendment as read prior to my comments and now distributed here in the House. So, Mr. Speaker and hon. members, amending the question this way would ensure that we can provide a meaningful answer to what is a very serious question.

With that, I conclude my remarks for now, and I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

3:30

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Yes. I’ll accept that amendment, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion on amendment carried]

[Written Question 9 as amended carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View to move Written Question 12.

First Nations Education

Q12. Dr. Swann asked that the following question be accepted.

What progress has been made on the First Nations-Alberta-Canada February 2010 memorandum of understanding on aboriginal education?

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is building on a long-term strategic action plan that Alberta arranged through an MOU with First Nations in Alberta in September 2013. Treaty 6 chiefs abstained from voting to approve the plan; however, all other parties – Treaty 7, Treaty 8, the government of Alberta, and the government of Canada – agreed to move forward. The question relates to a number of related questions. What work has been done since the Treaty 6 folks left the table to reintegrate them in the discussions? With the 2014 federal Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development’s introduction of Bill C-33, the First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act, I guess the question is: how will that affect the memorandum of understanding between the province and the First Nations? That bill, the federal bill, would provide \$1.9 billion over three years, starting in 2015-16, to 600 First Nations across Canada. Again, how will the federal bill affect the current MOU for First Nations

education in Alberta? Will Alberta chip in for any funding shortfalls during the interim?

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. J. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Written Question 12 be amended by striking out “on aboriginal education” and substituting “for First Nations education in Alberta.” The amended written question would read as follows:

What progress has been made on the First Nations-Alberta-Canada February 2010 memorandum of understanding for First Nations education in Alberta?

I move to amend the question just to more accurately reflect the proper name of the MOU.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Swann: I accept the amendment.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, in my haste to move things along because we have so many written questions, we went straight to a vote on the motion as amended. More properly, we should be voting on the amendment first, so let’s do that now.

[Motion on amendment carried]

[Written Question 12 as amended carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo to move Written Question 13.

School Teacher Staffing

Q13. Mr. Hehr asked that the following question be accepted.

How many full-time, part-time, and substitute teachers were/are there in the public and separate school systems in Alberta for the 2012-13 and current school years?

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think, actually, in estimate debates I received a graph from the hon. Minister of Education which may in part answer this question. But the reason for it is that there have been a great many students arriving in Alberta over the course of the last number of years, with a lessening emphasis on the amount of money that is going to education, at least from a baseline year of 2008-2009. The Alberta Teachers’ Association put out a graph where if we had kept up with that funding allocation, there would be substantially more teachers in this province than we currently have. Getting information on where our education system is in terms of the number of students and the number of teachers is very important to assess what is happening in our classrooms in terms of our classroom sizes and the amount of, I guess, pressure on schools, school boards, and teachers in this province to deliver programming. Having an actual number would assist us in assessing what’s working in education, where we are, and where we need to go.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. J. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, I move that Written Question 13 be amended by striking out “were/are there in the public and separate school systems in Alberta for the 2012-13 and current school years” and substituting that with “were there in the public and separate school systems in Alberta for 2012-13.” The amended written question would read as follows:

How many full-time, part-time, and substitute teachers were there in the public and separate school systems in Alberta for 2012-13?

Mr. Speaker, Education collects statistical information on teacher employment from school authorities throughout the year and at the end of the year. This data is used to maintain a current and accurate teacher registry system in accordance with section 15 of the Certification of Teachers Regulation. We don’t have the year-end results for this current school year, obviously, so I move to amend the question as the final counts for this school year, 2013-14, are not available to us until August of 2014.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, an amendment to Written Question 13 is now being circulated as far as I know. The minister has read it into the record. Is there any debate on the amendment?

The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: I accept the amendment. I thank the minister for his co-operation in this matter, and I look forward to getting that information in due course.

The Speaker: Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

[Written Question 13 as amended carried]

School Bus Transportation Costs

Q14. Mr. Hehr asked that the following question be accepted.

What is the average school bus transportation cost per student in both the public and separate school systems in Alberta for the 2012-13 and current school years?

Mr. Hehr: The reason we ask this question is because increasingly, as a result of this government’s failure to build schools in neighbourhoods where kids live, we’re seeing that not only busing costs faced by local schools boards but that busing times are increasing for children who ride the bus to school. This is a concern for us in that we believe it’s in the best interest to have kids at a school in their own community. This is not happening at this present time, so accordingly we want to figure out what is in the best interests of our children in terms of busing, how much this costs, and whether this is really an efficient use of government resources and in the best interests of our children going forward.

I also note that many school boards are having difficulty as a result of the fuel contingency agreement, that was in place in previous years, no longer being available. It means more costs are on them, and they have an inability to then hire teachers and build schools and the like and all of those things that school boards are tasked to do. In any event, that’s why we believe that information is pertinent, and we’re hoping that the minister can provide us with that information.

3:40

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. J. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I’d like to move an amendment to this question as well. Maybe the pages want to distribute this while I move that Written Question 14 be amended by striking out “and current school years” and substituting “school year.” The amended question would read as follows:

What is the average school bus transportation cost per student in both the public and separate school systems in Alberta for the 2012-13 school year?

I know the pages are getting their exercise here today with all these amendments.

Mr. Speaker, this is just similar to the last amendment that we requested. It’s a good question. We’re happy to provide the information. We just don’t have it until the end of the school year, and we can provide this information after the end of the school year just as we can with the previous question, Written Question 13.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, the amendment to Written Question 14 is now being circulated. Are we ready for the discussion anyway? Thank you.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you, hon. minister, for the assistance with my grammar in writing the question as well as providing the information to me in due course. I accept this amendment and thank him for it.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, you have the amendment, and it’s been accepted by the original mover and, of course, by the original sponsor.

[Motion on amendment carried]

[Written Question 14 as amended carried]

Motions for Returns

[The Clerk read the following motions for returns, which had been accepted]

Flood Mitigation Measures

M2. Ms Blakeman:

A return showing a copy of the report of the provincial advisory panel on community flood mitigation that proposed \$830 million in flood mitigation measures at the Alberta Flood Mitigation Symposium held in Calgary on October 4, 2013.

Flood/Disaster Insurance Studies

M3. Mr. Hehr:

A return showing copies of government studies or proposals related to the establishment of flood or disaster insurance in Alberta that were prepared between June 1, 2013, and January 1, 2014.

Task Force for Teaching Excellence

M7. Mr. Hehr:

A return showing copies of documents outlining the criteria and process that Leger, The Research Intelligence Group, used to select participants for the 14 public consultations related to the Task Force for Teaching Excellence that commenced on October 1, 2013.

LandLink Consulting Performance Review

M8. Ms Blakeman:

A return showing a copy of the performance review of LandLink Consulting Ltd. referenced by the Minister of Municipal Affairs during the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship's consideration of the ministry's 2013-14 estimates on April 17, 2013.

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

Survey Results for Budget 2014 Priorities

M1. Mr. Hehr moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of the responses that the government received from Albertans through its online survey on their priorities for Budget 2014.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In my view, how Albertans respond to these online surveys is very pertinent information to opposition parties as it would have a tendency to show Albertans' responses to budgets and what they believe to be in their best interests for their future in terms of how much revenue we bring in, how much spending we do, and how much debt we accumulate. The government collects this information. I assume they would be able to have this information put out to opposition parties to understand truly what Albertans believe or don't believe, frankly, on the current state of our finances. I think this information is in the hands of the government, and if they could provide it, it would be most helpful to all concerned in the name of openness and transparency.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Horner: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Motion for a Return 1 this consultation report again – and I almost hate to say this – is already available online. The What We Heard report provides details on the background and the purpose of the prebudget consultation. It provides a summary of the online survey results and a summary of open house results. The report also provides numerous anecdotal responses made by participants, even those that perhaps we didn't necessarily agree with. Given that much of this information is already online, I see really no reason to send a member the individual surveys filled out last fall by more than 2,000 Albertans.

It might be of interest to the House, Mr. Speaker, to know that the very first question on there was whether or not we should be using capital, you know, basically borrowing for capital, when it made financial sense. The overwhelming response on the survey was yes, which I thought was kind of interesting as well as some other interesting things. I'm sure the hon. member will like to read about the fact that we want to keep taxes low and the fact that we want to build the infrastructure even if it does mean going into capital debt. It's interesting that 2,000 Albertans surveyed would say that given what you hear from across the way sometimes.

Therefore, I do recommend that Motion for a Return 1 be rejected, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we have before us Motion for a Return 1, and we have the hon. sponsor to close debate on that.

Mr. Hehr: I categorically disagree with the story that was just told by the hon. member. With the deepest respect I don't think it would take his ministry that much in man-hours or time to let us

have all 2,000 of those survey examples. I have every confidence that the ministry may have – I won't say "did" – tended to see more positively some of the responses from Albertans than the average person in this Legislature or, in fact, the average person here in Alberta. I tend to think the government likes to see things that they want to see in responses, not as they actually are. So I take things like that with a grain of salt, what the hon. member just informed me of. I think it'd be very easy for him to click a button and to compile all of this information and get it to us.

I think that was their mandate, to be open and transparent, and then we, the opposition, could go through it and actually see what was said because frankly, sir, I have difficulties with the postulation that the government just condensed everything neatly into a couple of anecdotal sentences that said that Albertans think everything is sunshine and roses and lollipops in this province, because that's not what I'm hearing on the street, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

[Motion for a Return 1 lost]

Online Portal for Registry Services

M4. Mr. Kang moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of any documents relating to the implementation plan for an online portal for registry services in 2014.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall or someone on behalf of. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you. On behalf of the Member for Calgary-McCall I think the request is eminently sensible. It talks to openness and accountability, and I look forward to the minister's response.

3:50

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Service Alberta.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We reviewed this motion for a return. We do have an initiative under way for services to be made available online through the government-wide service portal, but we're still doing a lot of work on the consultations and on what exactly that would look like. We are planning some fundamental changes, but we are nowhere near any sort of implementation phase, so we have no document, so we're suggesting to members that we reject this motion for a return.

Dr. Swann: Well, I'm a little surprised on behalf, again, of the Member for Calgary-McCall that we haven't made more progress on this. This has been talked about for at least six months. I would have thought that we would have at least some indication of where this government is going on the portal. I'm disappointed, I guess, is what I would say, and I hope that the minister will provide us with that information as soon as possible.

[Motion for a Return 4 lost]

Tax Rates for Small Brewers

M5. Mr. Hehr moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of proposals to amend tax rates for small brewers that were developed by the government between January 1, 2012, and December 31, 2013.

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, as you will recall, there have been many proposals made by both small and mid-sized brewers in this province who believe that the rules and regulations around beer

brewing in this province do not foster a vibrant local brewing industry. I've asked questions about this before, and there still appears to be a great many people involved in the brewing industry who do not find that the rules and regulations incent a local brewing market. They point to many things, like the limits on the amount of production a company must have. The government gives out tax breaks to organizations to actually set up in other jurisdictions outside of Alberta, that appear to make no sense to many of the small brewers in this province. At one time I noted that the former deputy premier, back approximately a year ago, stated that he was actively working on this file to try and bring changes in. I do know that the government brought in some changes, but we're looking specifically at the proposals to amend the rates for the small brewers that were developed by the government during this time period.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are at this point in time no changes being presented. As it relates to the proposals mentioned in Motion for a Return 5, the requested information would constitute advice from officials. On that basis it should remain confidential, and we recommend that Motion for a Return 5 be rejected.

[Motion for a Return 5 lost]

Spirit Distillation Rules

M6. Mr. Hehr moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of proposals to amend Alberta's spirit distillation rules that were developed by the government between January 1, 2012, and December 31, 2013.

Mr. Hehr: This is similar to my last proposal, on the small brewers in this province, so I'm certain I'm going to get the same answer from the hon. President of Treasury Board.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Nevertheless, the reason why I'm pushing the government on these – although they have made some changes, especially to the spirit distillation side of things. The recent changes to encourage some other people to get into this business, I think, were a step in the right direction. I'm looking for more robust changes, again, to look at the small and mid-sized brewers in this province, who I believe are unnecessarily penalized in our system from actually developing a local brewing economy that would ensure that local employees are hired, that local products are used, and that people have more of a variety of Alberta-based brews and spirits.

Nevertheless, I know what the answer from the hon. minister of Treasury is going to be, so in order to move this along, I'm going to withdraw this motion for return so he doesn't have to get up and tell me that this is a private matter. I'll think about how to rework this question next time to maybe get some information. So I'm withdrawing the motion.

The Deputy Speaker: Okay. Thank you, hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo. Then for the record you are withdrawing Motion for a Return 6? It can't be withdrawn? We have to deal with it, hon. member, so we'll just be quick.

The President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Horner: He was right with his assumption, Mr. Speaker. I would move that we reject this.

The Deputy Speaker: Okay. Just for the record, then, hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, did you care to close?

Mr. Hehr: No. That's fine.

[Motion for a Return 6 lost]

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 203 Childhood Vision Assessment Act

[Debate adjourned April 7: Mrs. Towle speaking]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake had some speaking time left.

I would look, then, for the next speaker. I'll recognize the Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, followed by the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Anglin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was taken aback on the change of direction there. With regard to this bill we have had great discussion in our caucus, and what I've certainly agreed to – and we all have our individual votes to deal with it. I would then support this to take it to Committee of the Whole to see what changes the hon. member brings and keep a very open mind on how this bill progresses.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Just to keep the rotation going, I'll recognize the Member for Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock next.

Ms Kubinec: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour for me to rise today to speak to Bill 203, the Childhood Vision Assessment Act. I would like to thank the hon. Member for Red Deer-North for bringing this bill forward. The purpose of Bill 203 is to promote comprehensive and rigorous efforts to identify early vision issues in children so that they do not become a problem later in life. Specifically, this bill would require a vision exam for all children before they enter first grade. This bill also encourages the use of the Eye See . . . Eye Learn program, with which some hon. members might be familiar.

The hon. Member for Red Deer-North has never swayed in her advocacy for vision assessment in children, and I know I'm not alone in applauding her dedication. It is no secret that by now vision assessment plays a pivotal role in the success of every child in his or her academic and, eventually, professional pursuits. I am very pleased to be able to say that this government currently does an exemplary job of ensuring that visual health is its central focus in schools and pediatrics. It seems to me that the bill this hon. member has presented in this House is meant to build on our already strong accomplishments.

Of course, the plan outlined in Bill 203 would require the in-depth involvement of teachers and administrators, who are on the ground in our public schools. No plan can be implemented successfully without giving these dedicated individuals a central role. Teachers in particular are well positioned to identify potential problems and difficulties that children face given the amount of time spent with them. Obviously, teachers are physically in the classrooms with our children and have the

opportunity to make assessments of the child's progress on a day-to-day basis. Teachers are typically the first to be aware of any difficulties a child may be having. The early eye exam proposed in Bill 203 would assist teachers in making assessments as accurately as possible. This, in turn, would enable teachers to make the appropriate recommendations to parents and school administrators.

4:00

Almost 80 per cent of children in Alberta begin school without a comprehensive eye exam, yet vision problems have been identified as one of the major factors in limiting a child's ability to learn and succeed. For the first 12 years of a child's life 80 per cent of the child's learning is visual. Furthermore, it is no secret that good vision and good grades are strongly correlated. There is some interesting research that has been done in this area. Working out of the University of Lethbridge, Dr. Charles Boulet and Dr. Noella Piquette have argued that if there is an error in or impediment to sensory perception, higher cognitive functions such as reading, memory, emotional awareness, and impulse control can be affected. Dr. Boulet and Dr. Piquette both advance the argument that comprehensive vision assessment for children entering the 12-year academic cycle ought to be treated as a fundamental human right.

In schools functional defects in the visual process impair reading acquisition and learning. They also influence other behaviour. Children are affected by different types of impairments to eyesight and to visual function. The degree to which children are impacted varies according to the depth and nature of impediments present and to some degree ethnicity. Some children are at a greater disadvantage simply because of the greater visual demands of the modern classroom. Specifically, the increased use of smart classrooms and digital technology can pose potential problems for some students based upon their visual needs. These visual impediments to learning may include dyslexia, visual stress, and scotopic sensitivity syndrome. These are rarely detected in common eyesight screenings and are associated with limited socioeconomic success and increased criminality.

Significant visual impediments to learning limit academic and life outcomes, with some demographics affected by a greater prevalence of reading impediments. This study finds that this presents added difficulties for various public agencies at all levels of the government. Matters are complicated further when children who are afflicted with visual impairments choose not to report the problem. This is a decision that can stem from frustration and embarrassment. Teachers are trained and experienced in noticing the manifestations of this frustration in student performance. This is why they may be our single most valuable resource when it comes to monitoring how our kids are developing.

As the situation currently stands, the success of the Eye See . . . Eye Learn program relies heavily on teachers who work closely with parents. Each fall kindergarten teachers send information packages home with each of their students to be received by parents. Parents are encouraged to book appointments for their children to have their eyes examined. The program has gained endorsement from every public school division across Alberta. Free eyeglasses are also offered to kindergarten students when prescribed by an eye doctor.

One question to ask now is whether this is a sufficient application of what our teachers are potentially capable of. While the Eye See . . . Eye Learn program has enjoyed some admirable success, we may be able to do more. Achieving universal vision assessment prior to grade 1 for all students would be a remarkable accomplishment and would certainly be something that we could be proud of.

But as important and worthy a goal as the promotion of vision health in children may be, we ought not to overlook the additional positive impact that could result from implementing a strategy such as Bill 203 proposes. Children benefit greatly when there exists a close and constructive relationship between their parents and their teachers. Through Bill 203 we can offer another avenue that joins both parents and teachers together by being thoroughly invested in students' vision assessments and further nurturing that relationship.

This inclusion could extend to school administrators as well. There is much room opened up by this bill for new ways to more tightly integrate the various elements of the school environment, and this is only to the benefit of students. A system of tight-knit supports is essential for any child's success. What could be better than to foster it with these supports from day one, or rather from grade 1, when children begin their student careers in earnest?

Mr. Speaker, I am very excited by the range of potential this bill promises. It offers an invigorating opportunity to improve the health and lives of children, to improve the academic performance of students, and to foster closer and more effective relationships between parents, teachers, and administrators.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Red Deer-North for bringing this to the attention of the House today. I also want to reiterate my respect for this hon. member for her continued advocacy for children and students.

With that, I conclude my remarks and look forward to supporting this bill, I hope alongside my hon. colleagues and counterparts. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I'll recognize next the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to rise and speak to Bill 203, the Childhood Vision Assessment Act. I just want to say at the onset that, you know, I believe in the spirit of this bill. However, I'm going to outline some of my concerns with the way it's written. I do want to note that I've already heard that amendments are going to be coming forward to strengthen and improve this bill. It begs the question: why didn't the mover of this bill take the time to ensure that we got it right the first time as opposed to tabling a bill and then having amendments come forward?

Having said that, I want to speak to this because I think childhood vision is a very important subject, and it should be addressed and addressed by this government. No child should have to go without a proper vision screening and assessment and without ensuring that they have the proper tools to be successful. I think, you know, the fact is that many of the issues related to vision and vision care can be prevented or fixed, so I thank the member for raising this bill in the House and this issue.

Just to give a quick little recap, Mr. Speaker, I mean, it would legislate all parents to be responsible for having their children's eyes tested before entering grade 1. Now, the parents must provide to the school a form signed by the optometrist or ophthalmologist. Part of the challenge with this first piece is that it places the onus on the parents rather than the school or the health care system within the province as far as tracking this down and getting them to sign off on it.

Now, I recognize that the eye doctor is forbidden from charging parents for the completion of the form, but it doesn't address the actual cost related to the eye exam itself. Alberta health care provides coverage for one visit a year for children up to 19 years of age. It does not address the problem if a child needs follow-up

examinations or if the child must get glasses. I do appreciate that the previous speaker talked about, you know, one pair of eyeglasses being included. I would challenge any member of this Assembly who has children to claim that their kids can go through one set of eyeglasses for a number of years. I think it's more like multiple pairs of glasses as children are children.

The other thing, Mr. Speaker, is that the bill doesn't say anything about the passing on of added administrative costs incurred by the optometrists' offices or the schools themselves with the new paperwork and tracking that would be required.

What the Alberta NDP is looking at, Mr. Speaker, is that instead of forcing parents to obtain a test and the form, the public school system ought to be empowered and funded to provide eye exams, screening exams, for all students going into grade 1. Let's equip the very institutions that all of these young people are coming to to be able to perform these screening exams and assessments right at the school. We'd accomplish the same goals that the legislation is attempting to address, but we'd do it in a way that's more inclusive and putting less of an onus on parents and on families, especially those living in fairly remote parts of the province.

4:10

Many parents may not have the time or the ability to take their children or child to an optometrist. They may be both working during hours of operation, during the day. One question that I have, Mr. Speaker, is: how would these students be accommodated, and would the parents be compensated in any way if they had to take time off work to take their child or children to get these eye exams or screenings done?

Now, the ministry is also able to set the conditions and standards for visual assessment of children who transfer from a school outside of Alberta, where the law is not in effect. A question, Mr. Speaker, is: will this have an effect on students transferring from outside of the province?

This bill as it's currently written, Mr. Speaker, would ensure that all students have their eyes tested before starting grade 1, which is obviously an important part of the learning process, and the Alberta NDP are onboard with ensuring that kids have every tool at their disposal to be successful in school. Obviously, we recognize that if kids, you know, can't see or can't see well, it's going to adversely affect their ability in school to learn and to succeed. Again, a concern, Mr. Speaker, is making the parents responsible for getting their children's eyes tested. You know, some parents may feel the government is telling them that they're unable to adequately parent their child. Additionally, it's true that some children don't have a problem with their vision at this age and may not need an eye exam.

This would also, obviously, greatly increase the workload of optometrists in the province, and it's likely that those costs are going to get passed on to the government or to the consumer. Would we still have to pay for these tests? In fact, the cost would probably go up since now all grade 1 children would be going for an eye exam, where before only some of them were. You know, again, what we're looking at or proposing or asking, Mr. Speaker, is: why can't we just spend this money to be proactive, providing exams in schools rather than reimbursing on the backside? This would also, going again to the backside, increase the amount of paperwork and administration associated with it.

Now, the minister is able to make regulations concerning any additional matter or thing that is necessary in furtherance of this act. Questions for the mover: what's going to be included in this measure? What additional requirements will be issued in regard to vision assessment?

Forcing all parents to have their child's eyes tested and provide the school with proof before they can start grade 1 could be perceived as discriminatory. Now, again, while the NDP supports the objective of having all children get their eyes tested before they enter grade 1 – if children cannot see, obviously they'll fall behind in class – our position, my position, Mr. Speaker, is that this bill goes about this task in the wrong way, that it could be much better.

We're talking about removing barriers to children being successful in school. Instead of forcing parents to go out and get their children examined before they start school, the idea of providing the school system with funding – and I need to make this evidently clear, especially for the Education minister, that there would be dollars to help ensure that schools can provide this service as opposed to just thrusting another demand on our front-line workers and our schools and school boards.

Dr. Swann: Preferably well before the school year.

Mr. Bilous: That's a very good point – thank you – that these exams aren't done all at once on day 1 of the school year, so that we actually have, again, a staggered approach and do this in the most efficient way possible.

Again, you know, let's have optometrists come and test grade 1 students at the beginning of the year. You could stagger it throughout the school system. The approach achieves the same outcome as the bill as it's currently written though it's going to be much more inclusive. We're going to ensure that we're getting all students as opposed to some falling through the cracks.

On that note as well, I just want to note, Mr. Speaker, questions that I do have around: if students don't come to school with a note saying that they got this test, what are the consequences? Are they refused completion of their registration? Are they refused participation in extracurricular activities? What are the consequences? Again, I don't know how punishing our students even further – so now they have inadequate vision in addition to being unable to participate in some activities or even register – is going to be beneficial.

The other point with that, Mr. Speaker, is that if they are prevented from completing the registration, that could mean for school boards that they get fewer dollars because how the funding envelope works is that schools are funded for their student count. But there is a time set on that, and I believe that for the fall it is the end of September. So if there are challenges for a student, where they're not allowed to finish their enrolment at a school, then the school is not going to be able to receive dollars for that student, which could cause problems, obviously, as far as ensuring that the school has enough resources for every student in the classroom, or you know, some schools may even be refusing the student the right to register after the end of September.

Regarding the Eye See . . . Eye Learn program, this is a great example of a current program that helps kindergarten children obtain an eye exam and, if needed, complementary glasses. But, again, the challenge with this program, Mr. Speaker, is that it still requires that parents seek out and make an appointment with a participating optometrist.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.
I recognize the Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great honour for me to speak on Bill 203 as proposed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North. In my view, this is a forward-sighted bill that looks to address a very complex issue, youth

eyesight exams: how they're best administered and how they can make the lives better for those kids if we have these exams and they're universally provided through some mechanism in our society. I applaud the member for putting that bill forward.

I do note that there have been many suggestions here, and probably very valid ones, as to some of the pitfalls of the proposed legislation. I would prefer for us to look at this in a more holistic manner and in the manner of trying to actually rectify a problem and rectify some of the inequalities that are out there in our society. I think we can do that. I think we can do that with some hard work and effort on our amendments to see that this bill survives.

The reason why, in my view, I think it should survive is because of some of the statistics brought up in debate here today. The fact is that by grade 1 80 per cent of kids who are going to our schools here in Alberta have not received an eye exam. That identifies to us a clear problem that exists, and when we as legislators see a clear problem that exists, like kids not getting eye exams, I think that means that we should respond in some form or fashion. The evidence is perfectly clear that children's eye problems if not identified early – and there are arguments that maybe we should even be doing this earlier as a legislative body, that this should actually be happening in some form or fashion. This bill does its best to do that.

So we've identified a problem, we're identifying one mode of solution, and we can see that it will affect kids going forward. When we know that evidence, now what do we do with it? Well, we have to bring in something to ameliorate the circumstances that there are. I think that for us to look at this problem, we have to understand that 20 per cent of parents are getting their kids the help or the eye exam they need. What's the issue with the other parents? Well, I don't know. For some it may be financial. For some it may be otherwise. For some it may be information. Frankly, it doesn't matter. The kids need eye exams.

I believe in the concept of equality of opportunity. Whether you're born in a rich family or a poor family, the government of the day should give kids an opportunity to succeed. They can succeed more easily or more readily by having some form of eye examination, preferably as early as possible.

I was just chatting with the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, who suggests that even a more practical approach to this matter may be having eye exams at the age of three, when they have their immunizations. Really, is it too late for us to be waiting until ages five or six, when they're in the school system? Should we not be using this opportunity to explore whether that is an option, to have a screening test set up at that time for kids so that they can get the eye help they need at an even younger age, which would allow them to be even more ready for the school system and more ready to develop their potential? I believe that solution is one that in all practicality should be explored, and whether that can be done in this bill or not, I'm not certain. What is clear from this bill is that we have to act on this situation. We have to ensure that kids have access to eye exams and go forward with that.

4:20

Just as one of those interesting things, I look at what our society funds. Once kids get to be six years old, we fund their school. We fund things like postsecondary. We fund things throughout people's lives in the health care system. When we turn 65 and even older, we get some form of a pension cheque or some form of health care. We all know the statistics that the vast majority of health care dollars or probably dollars spent by our government is when people get older. Really, is that the right thing? If we're looking at maximizing the potential of our society going forward,

that would be reversed. Governments would invest much more money in children's lives between the ages of zero and six in terms of learn-through-play programs, in terms of bills like these, which get kids the eye help they need and set them on to really develop their potential. I think this bill also alerts us to that. Why are we often ignoring kids who are zero to six and often dealing with other issues that seem pertinent, but those individuals may actually just have a different ability to have their voices heard? We have to continue to listen and look at what best serves our society going forward and evaluate that.

In any event, I believe this bill has great merit for getting kids the eye exams that they need to succeed. It fits firmly within equality of opportunity. It recognizes that there's a problem out there and that we as legislators have to deal with it. Whether we can get that best placed in Committee of the Whole, I believe we all should bring our best ideas forward through that and try and do that at this time. What we've learned in this Legislature is that kids need eye health and need to be ready for grade 1 and to succeed in school. If somehow it does not succeed – and I'm hoping we can rectify everything there because it's an idea whose time has come – then we move immediately to where this government or some other private member puts forward another idea to get this established here in Alberta.

In any event, those are my thoughts, Mr. Speaker, and I thank you very much, as always, for the opportunity to take part in debate.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I recognize the hon. Associate Minister – Accountability, Transparency and Transformation.

Mr. Scott: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very honoured to rise today and speak to Bill 203, the Childhood Vision Assessment Act, which has been brought forward by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North. I know that children's vision awareness is an issue and that this hon. member is particularly passionate about that issue.

Mr. Speaker, although there is no legislation currently in place that requires school-aged children to undergo vision examinations prior to entering grade 1, few know that Alberta Health fully covers the cost of eye examinations for all children up to age 18. Bill 203 would ensure that by grade 1 children would fully utilize these free Alberta Health eye examinations in order to help reduce potential learning and behavioural difficulties, that are detrimental to children with eyesight impairments.

Specifically, it would mandate a form with proof of examination in order to complete grade 1 enrolment and encourage the use of the Eye See... Eye Learn program. However, this would in no way stop a child from entering school. Essentially, Bill 203 is looking to ensure that childhood vision issues are identified and resolved in order to give each child the best chance at academic success. I am confident that hon. members of this Assembly are well aware that eye examinations are an important public health strategy for a healthy Alberta. Early identification of vision problems is asymptomatic for individuals and allows them to benefit from direct preventative action.

Given the importance of eye screening as a public health strategy it is essential that we examine the work of other jurisdictions such as the United States regarding this important issue. Therefore, I would like to spend some time discussing the work of the American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus, or AAPOS, as well as the state-by-state vision screening requirements. The goals of that organization involve advancing the quality of children's eye care, supporting the

training of pediatric ophthalmologists, supporting research activities in pediatric ophthalmology, and advancing the care of adults with strabismus.

For those who are unfamiliar with strabismus, it refers to the abnormal alignment of one or both eyes, characterized by a turning inwards or outwards from the nose, thus preventing parallel vision.

In terms of advancing the quality of children's eye care, AAPOS establishes practice guidelines for pediatric ophthalmology at the highest level of competence and ethics, encourages the training of ophthalmologists who are primarily concerned with eye care of children, and fosters concepts that benefit children's eye health through preventative as well as remedial activities.

Mr. Speaker, the benefits of vision screening are numerous. They are quick, accurate, cost-efficient, have a high rate of problem detection, and minimize unnecessary referrals. In preschool children, for example, vision screening has been used for the early detection of amblyopia, or lazy eye, the leading cause of monocular blindness in the 20- to 70-year age range in high-income countries. Unfortunately, the benefits of vision screening are either ignored or not well publicized. I say this because almost 80 per cent of children in Alberta begin school without a comprehensive eye exam. This means that there are numerous children in school right now with undiagnosed vision issues.

I believe Bill 203 would go a long way to correct those undiagnosed vision issues in children. By requiring a form with proof of examination in order to complete grade 1, parents can be assured that their children are not suffering from any undiagnosed eye issues. I want to be clear, though, Mr. Speaker, that Bill 203 would not prevent children from attending school.

According to AAPOS 43 out of the 50 American states have either a state policy, a code, statutes, regulations, or local school board requirements regarding vision screening and tests. For example, Alabama's screening requirements fall under code 16-29-1, which was established in 1965. This code states that the Department of Education and the State Board of Health are to arrange for the examination of each child attending public school in the state, including for "diseases of the ear, eye, nose and throat, mouth and teeth . . . and any disease requiring medical or surgical aid in developing the child into a strong and healthy individual."

California's education code 49452 requires the governing board of a school district to provide for the testing of hearing and vision of each enrolled pupil within the district while education code 49455 requires students to have their vision screened upon enrolment and at least every third year thereafter until completion of the eighth grade.

In Arkansas code 6-18-1501, which governs vision screening, requires all children in pre-K, kindergarten, grades 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8 to be given eye exams and vision tests. The code stipulates that "the responsibility for the enforcement of this section rests equally with each school district or public charter school and the parent or guardian of the child." Further, the code details that eye and vision screening shall include the specific tests, procedures, equipment, and instruments approved by the Arkansas Commission on Eye and Vision Care of School-Age Children and the department.

4:30

In Kentucky one section of Bill 706, An Act Relating to Early Childhood Development, requires that all children three to six years of age entering public preschool or public school for the first time have an eye examination by an optometrist or an ophthalmologist no later than January 1 of the school year.

This section of Bill 706 states that "a vision examination by an optometrist or ophthalmologist . . . shall be required by the Kentucky Board of Education" and that "the administrative regulations shall require evidence that a vision examination that meets the criteria prescribed by the Kentucky Board of Education has been performed." Given the existence of Bill 706 in the state Legislature it is clear that the Kentucky General Assembly identified problems with vision as an important factor limiting children's ability to learn and succeed and decided to act upon these problems. I believe that Bill 203 provides our Legislative Assembly with the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of other jurisdictions such as Alabama, Arkansas, California, and Kentucky.

It is unacceptable that almost 80 per cent of children in Alberta begin school without a comprehensive eye exam. Bill 203 could help ensure that any previously undiagnosed vision issues are corrected prior to grade 1. Mr. Speaker, one of the pillars of the building Alberta plan is investing in families and communities. This pillar specifically mentions that every child should have the opportunity for the best possible start in life. By moving forward with Bill 203 in this Assembly today, we are keeping our commitment to Albertans. We are illustrating to them that current and future generations of Alberta's schoolchildren will have the tools that they need to succeed with every step that they take into the classroom. For too long children have been allowed to enter school without proper vision assessment.

I would like to thank the hon. Member for Red Deer-North for bringing forward Bill 203. Once again her passion for children's issues is nothing short of inspirational. I hope all hon. members of the Assembly will rise today and join me in supporting Bill 203.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, followed by Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Ms Fenske: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that if I were here today and didn't have my glasses with me, I wouldn't be able to read my notes off this page. As a young child when you don't know what you're missing before you have an eye exam and get your glasses, I think your mind tends to wander. You find some ways to be able to occupy yourself because you really can't focus on the words on the page. So I would like to thank the hon. Member for Red Deer-North for bringing childhood vision health for debate in this Legislature.

Bill 203, as we've heard, would require a comprehensive vision assessment by grade 1 to help reduce potential learning and behavioural difficulties that affect children with impairment. My colleague has brought this bill to our attention because many children of school age have vision-related problems, and many more begin school without a complete and comprehensive eye exam. Grade 1s would do well to be encouraged to use the Eye See . . . Eye Learn program. Currently, the Eye See . . . Eye Learn program provides kindergarten students with a free pair of glasses, when needed, after undergoing an examination. I would think that all parents would welcome that kind of support.

As one of my colleagues across the floor had mentioned, children will need probably more than one set of glasses over the span of many years. Well, that's true, but I think we've got to find out whether children do have those visual impairments, and we need a place to start. The hon. Member for Red Deer-North has provided us with a very sound bill with the amendments that she has proposed to allow us to be able to assist children. We want them to succeed. According to figures gathered by the Alberta

Association of Optometrists, more than 25 per cent of school-age children will have vision problems that limit their potential in all aspects of academic success.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 203 is part of an even better vision for Alberta. This is a vision where Alberta's families and communities are set up for success with the resources and the tools needed now and into the future. Testing the visual health of our children is a very important part of that vision, too. I myself certainly acknowledge the importance of screening for health conditions which can adversely affect educational quality for our students and their overall health. In saying this as part of our mandate, this government has made a commitment to enhancing the health and the well-being of all Albertans. This commitment includes recognizing the important role that vision examination plays in maintaining the health of all Albertans.

This government has recently reinforced its commitment to screening through its dedication to the importance of vision health, where children up to 18 years of age are eligible to receive eye examinations at no extra cost to families. After all, over 80 per cent of a child's learning is visual. That means that from day one children rely heavily on their eyes and vision to read and to write, to connect with their peers, their teachers, and to succeed in the classroom environment. Poor vision health can act as an impediment to the learning process, hindering our children from succeeding and mastering an absolutely critical skill, reading.

Now, there have been various studies drawing on the link between deviant behaviour and illiteracy, as previously mentioned by one of my colleagues. Mr. Speaker, 43 out of 50 states have policies, codes, statutes, regulations, or local school board requirements regarding vision screening and tests. This figure emphasizes the importance of vision in the classroom and the overall academic environment. Even research conducted right here in this province highlights the crucial role that vision plays in a child's learning environment.

For many of us visual ability can be something that we take for granted, but if our visual health was compromised in any way, how we see the world would impact us as well. Our day to day would become more difficult, reading and learning more strenuous. Mr. Speaker, children learning to read for the first time do not report these difficulties more often than not because they do not know that what they are seeing is out of the ordinary and sometimes do not understand the difficulty that they are experiencing. Until a comprehensive eye examination is completed, children may go through their first years of school disliking reading, writing, and overall learning.

Dr. Charles Boulet and Dr. Noella Piquette, working out of the University of Lethbridge, have argued that visual or sensory functioning is very much interconnected with higher cognitive functions such as reading and memory. Further, functional defects of the visual process can impact a number of things, from reading and learning to our other behaviours. Given how essential vision is to learning, it has also been argued that adequate vision management is a matter of fundamental human rights. Again, this connection between visual-perceptual problems, reading, behaviour, and other disabilities makes vision one of the most important areas to target in early testing and assessment.

Mr. Speaker, today's modern classroom also presents added challenges to visual processing. In many classrooms today children no longer have overheads, chalkboards, or even whiteboards to learn from; they have computer screens, iPads, and PowerPoint presentations. That has become the norm as well as digitalized Smart boards replacing familiar whiteboards and modes of instruction, creating more demand on students' visual processing skills.

Ms L. Johnson: How about brown boards?

Ms Fenske: Brown boards? I don't think I had those in my life. Thank you, hon. member.

Within the various domains of visual processing a child's visual health can vary significantly. Mr. Speaker, I know in speaking with the hon. member about some of the issues that people may see preventing children from getting their eye exams if they live in rural areas, which she has had the opportunity to address in speaking with people who provide that service. I'm looking forward to not only having the vision of the students tested but, I guess, the opportunity to have some creative methods of ensuring that that testing occurs throughout the province of Alberta.

I think that Bill 203 is an important step in working to achieve that our children can see and can be successful in school. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I'd like to recognize the hon. Member for Red Deer-North to close debate on second reading of Bill 203.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank all the members who spoke in second reading debate on Bill 203. There are a few comments and questions that I would like to clarify.

The first is regarding consultation. There has been consultation with a number of groups although as a private member I do not have the resources for extensive consultation. I've consulted with the Alberta College of Optometrists, the Alberta Association of Optometrists, teachers, the Alberta School Boards Association, the CNIB, and others. If Bill 203 passes and the minister responsible decides to proclaim the bill, the department will conduct further consultation to determine what the regulations will be and to develop this policy. I've also received letters from the Alberta College of Optometrists and the Alberta association that suggest amendments to strengthen the bill. Mr. Speaker, I have already committed to take the advice and recommendations of these organizations with whom I have consulted and put them forward as amendments in Committee of the Whole.

4:40

When the bill passes or if the bill passes in second reading, another concern that has been raised is the interpretation of section 2(2), that states that a parent must provide a form, and section 2(5), that states that registration is not complete until this form required is received. This does not mean that a child cannot attend school. A child will be able to attend school, and parents will be reminded and encouraged to have their child's eyes examined. I will clarify these sections in Committee of the Whole so that there cannot be any misinterpretation.

Mr. Speaker, a number of members also raised the concern about costs. I can tell you that we are now paying 10 times the costs for the extra work and efforts required to teach a child suffering from undetected visual impediments. As Dr. Hoang said in the document that I tabled earlier, "If you have a child who is 6 or under, ask them how well they see. You will find that they have a hard time understanding this simple question. This is because they do not know any differently." They do not know. It is up to us to partner with parents to ensure that all children are prepared to learn in school.

The costs for complete eye exams are already in the health care budget, and if a child receives the eye exams through the Eye See . . . Eye Learn program in kindergarten, they also receive eyeglasses free of charge if needed. Cost is not a factor in Bill 203. However, savings is a huge factor. We can save significant

costs to the educational, health, and justice systems simply by implementing Bill 203.

Mr. Speaker, I have tried to address many of the concerns raised in second reading debate. I would like to especially thank the Member for Edmonton-Centre, who gave a very clear, concise, and logical speech about supporting this bill. I don't say this very often, but I'd like to say it now. The Member for Edmonton-Centre is right. "Kids should have eye exams before they come to school. We can agree on that. That's a fairly straightforward principle, don't you think?"

Mr. Speaker, I wish I had the time to quote from many of my other esteemed colleagues. However, a five-minute closing speech does not allow this. Second reading is to debate the principle of the bill. We all agree on the principle of having eyes checked in preparing a child for school to have the tools they need to learn. Some believe, and I quote Dr. Boulet from the letter I tabled today, that "accepting the status quo is to say that neglect of children is an acceptable standard." The status quo isn't good enough anymore because now we know the difference.

Mr. Speaker, the right thing to do is to support Bill 203. We expect children to be in school for 11 or 12 years, and we do everything possible in the classroom to help them succeed. For 25 per cent of students the path to success includes correcting visual impediments. Vision is complicated, and it is important. It affects everything from health and speech to reading, balance, coordination, and fine motor control. There is nothing in Bill 203 that would prevent a child from gaining access to a quality Alberta education. There is no cost to families for this service, but the cost to children, education, and health care are enormous when children suffer in silence. Passing Bill 203 in second reading is the right thing to do. It is proactive, and it is the only way to ensure that all children are prepared to learn and to read. I ask all my hon. colleagues to support Bill 203 and to support the children of Alberta by doing so.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

[Motion carried unanimously; Bill 203 read a second time]

Bill 204
Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy
(MLA Public Interest Fee Waiver)
Amendment Act, 2014

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

Mr. Barnes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the chance to rise and talk today about Bill 204, the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (MLA Public Interest Fee Waiver) Amendment Act, 2014. As colleagues I invite all of you to support this bill. Many, many times I've heard you all stand up and talk about your desire for greater transparency, for greater public input into our government and our society and our province. I've also seen many written articles, whether it's articles with journalists or some of your blogs or some of the papers that you've put out, again, requesting the same kind of thing, asking for a greater opportunity to have openness, to have more transparency, and to have public input into what happens in our great province.

Of course, we've used the phrase "gold standard" in here more than perhaps any other phrase, so I will ask you to support this bill because I believe it does enhance our gold standard. I believe it does go a long distance to improve the engagement of Albertans in our government, the engagement of taxpayers and Albertans in

our public process, and the opportunity for Albertans to be involved.

It starts by allowing MLAs to have four free freedom of information requests per year. The importance of this: I think we may be the most involved watchdogs of public dealings. Certainly, there are lots of other people with vested interests in important things that go on, but for the 87 of us once every four years or thereabouts, we're held totally accountable by some side of 40,000 of our constituents and all 4 million Albertans. We are the most involved watchdogs of public dealings, opposition MLAs and private members of this Legislative Assembly. We're elected to serve. We're elected to hold the government accountable. We're elected to make Alberta better and stronger, and to do that, from time to time we need access to public information.

Of course, with FOIP requests there are fees attached. Sometimes there are very high fees attached to accessing information. My bill is simple. It empowers MLAs to bring about transparency. It empowers us to bring about transparency by giving MLAs four fee waivers per calendar year.

I think it's an area where it may really open up the chance to engage Albertans when we look at some of our low voter turnouts, when we look at how countries like Switzerland have so much more engagement from their citizens, without \$200 fines and those kinds of things. This bill will allow any Albertan and, especially, I hope, it will allow not-for-profits that function so efficiently and so well throughout our province, that do so much work so efficiently for us, to go to any MLA, not just their own but any MLA, to ask them to do the freedom of information request, thereby improving transparency, thereby engaging all Albertans.

When we were first elected in April 2012 – or at least I was – one of the things that really set me back was that after a while it was discovered that we were past our budget in monies that we had been spending on freedom of information requests. We were waiting to hear if some of these were in the public interest, if we were going to get some of these fees back. But the long and the short of it: it was slowing us down in doing the job that we were elected to do. Again, it made me think of the not-for-profits, the many, many hard-working people in our province that do tremendous work for us, and if this is a bottleneck for them, this is a way to really, really help information, public information, become accessible to where it can do the most good, to where Albertans can work with it and make our province better.

MLAs would first request a fee waiver through the current process. If the MLA is turned down, we could invoke the Bill 204 waiver right through the Privacy Commissioner, waiving the fee. The importance of that, of course, is that the Privacy Commissioner would look at the request and could determine to satisfy it if the request was not frivolous, vexatious, or without merit. We would still have the Privacy Commissioner looking at it to ensure that it was in the public interest, in the public good, and that it was on the right track.

4:50

Also, the bill has an addition. For any fee waivers granted pursuant to section 93.1, the name of the Member of the Legislative Assembly who received the fee waiver and the public body involved would also be disclosed, again increasing that gold standard of accountability, that gold standard that we have to deal with every four years when we face our electorate anyway. But this would go a long distance to protect the public, to get the public involved in public information to make our province better. I also believe that this bill would increase our government's willingness to provide information on a proactive basis without

MLAs, without not-for-profits, without Alberta citizens having to chase it down. More information in the provincial sphere, in the public sphere, would be a good thing.

You know, one of the reasons I think this bill is important: some of the freedom of information requests we've done appear to take a year and a half to two years. Some of them have taken up to four to six years, I understand, obviously destroying how pertinent that information is and costing us as Albertans the opportunity to take that information and do something valuable with it, to make us stronger.

It was interesting hearing my colleague from Red Deer-North talk about all the consulting that she did and all the hard work that she had done. Well, I took it upon myself to talk to many, many Albertans, particularly in Cypress-Medicine Hat, and it always amazed me how many of them were surprised to hear that MLAs just couldn't do free freedom of information requests anyway. I believe the federal government only charges \$25 for theirs, so it's almost like being free. There were many, many that were concerned that we couldn't do more than four. A lot suggested 12, once a month. I decided to come up with four to keep it reasonable, to start somewhere. Of course, if this moves through, we'll have the opportunity to make some amendments and discuss this.

But, again, many, many Albertans out there are relishing the opportunity, are looking at this as an opportunity for us as MLAs, accountable every four years, and for them, the 4 million Alberta citizens, to be more engaged in our process. Also, I think that if it's four per year, it'll hold it to a situation where it would be more relevant ones, and it'll be the opportunity for us as MLAs to engage more of our constituents and more of our fellow Albertans.

Colleagues, I've talked to many Albertans, again, particularly in Cypress-Medicine Hat, who relish the idea of this, who were surprised that we couldn't do it anyway, who are asking that their government be more open, be more accountable, make it easier for them to access the information, and for the opportunity to be involved in this great province of ours.

Mr. Speaker, with that, I would relinquish the floor, and I would ask all 87 of my colleagues in here to please consider this bill, that will enhance our gold standard.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I recognize the hon. Associate Minister for Accountability, Transparency and Transformation.

Mr. Scott: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise today to speak to Bill 204, the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (MLA Public Interest Fee Waiver) Amendment Act, 2014. I'd like to thank the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat for bringing this bill forward. This will give us an opportunity to discuss the FOIP process in some detail as there seems to be some confusion as to what it entails. Bill 204 proposes to provide every MLA with four free freedom of information, or FOIP, requests every year.

It may be helpful to provide some background for context. The FOIP Act was introduced in the Alberta Legislature in the spring of 1994, following an extensive public consultation process by an all-party panel. The act, which reflected the recommendations of the all-party panel and the input of Albertans, is seen as the cornerstone of an open, accessible, and accountable government for the people of Alberta, and rightfully so. It was proclaimed into force on October 1, 1995, for public bodies such as government departments, agencies, boards, commissions, and other organizations designated in the FOIP regulation.

Extending the act to include local public bodies such as school boards, health authorities, postsecondary educational institutions, and municipalities began with school boards in September 1998. It concluded with local governments, such as municipalities, in October 1999. The act was amended in 1999 in response to a review by a select special committee of the Legislative Assembly. A second review by a select special committee was completed in 2002, and the act was subsequently amended in May 2003.

Section 93 of the act allows that fees may be charged to an applicant. There is a structure as well as limitations for maximum rates that govern how fees are to be charged. There are a large number of factors that go into determining the fees to be charged, including such things as shipping records, supervising the examination of records by the applicant, basic retrieval of records, and so on.

Processing FOIP applications is by no means a cheap task, Mr. Speaker. It is a process that requires time, resources, and manpower. This is a fact that seems to be underappreciated. Given the resources that go into fulfilling FOIP requests, the fees that are charged are very minor in comparison. The FOIP regulation stipulates that there is a \$25 initial fee for one-time requests, a \$50 initial fee for continuing requests, and additional fees when the cost of processing requests for records exceeds \$150. The FOIP regulations already contain a provision to excuse applicants from paying fees where appropriate.

As I do not believe the current FOIP legislation was even reviewed when Bill 204 was drafted, I would like to remind members of the law that is in place. Section 93 of the act:

- 93(1) The head of a public body may require an applicant to pay to the public body fees for services as provided for in the regulations.
- (2) Subsection (1) does not apply to a request for the applicant's own personal information, except for the cost of producing the copy.
- (3) If an applicant is required to pay fees for services under subsection (1), the public body must give the applicant an estimate of the total fee before providing the services.
 - (3.1) An applicant may, in writing, request that the head of a public body excuse the applicant from paying all or part of a fee for services under subsection (1).
- (4) The head of a public body may excuse the applicant from paying all or part of a fee if, in the opinion of the head,
 - (a) the applicant cannot afford the payment or for any other reason it is fair to excuse payment, or
 - (b) the record relates to a matter of public interest, including the environment or public health or safety.
- (4.1) If an applicant has, under subsection (3.1), requested the head of a public body to excuse the applicant from paying all or part of a fee, the head must give written notice of the head's decision to grant or refuse the request to the applicant within 30 days after receiving the request.
- (5) If the head of a public body refuses an applicant's request under subsection (3.1), the notice referred to in subsection (4.1) must state that the applicant may ask for a review under Part 5.
- (6) The fees referred to in subsection (1) must not exceed the actual costs of the services.

As you can see, the ability to waive fees is already in place, and the process is merit-based, as it should be.

We need an answer to the obvious question of why Bill 204's proposal is necessary. We have yet to receive a satisfactory answer. There are a few other questions in addition to this that remain unanswered. For instance, would these free FOIPs be in addition to the ability to apply for fee waivers as outlined in the regulation? Would they be transferable if they were unused? Would they carry over to the next year? Perhaps most importantly,

how would this be monitored and regulated? Mr. Speaker, notwithstanding the many glaring contradictions in policy at play in Bill 204, it has also clearly not been carefully thought out if these sorts of questions are still up in the air.

Quite frankly, this is a demonstration that the party opposite has little in the way of practical qualifications for governance. A big part of governance is about helping things to run smoothly. It is about implementing policy that serves the needs of Albertans, not the conveniences of politicians. Those policies need to be crafted in a manner that allows them to be manageable . . .

5:00

The Deputy Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt you, hon. minister, but the time for consideration of this item has expired. You will have time carried over when we revisit this item at the next opportunity.

Motions Other than Government Motions

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Traffic Safety Act

504. Mr. Allen moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to introduce amendments to the Traffic Safety Act allowing harsher penalties to be imposed on drivers guilty of excessive speeding in order to deter high-risk driving behaviours on Alberta's highways.

Mr. Allen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to present my first motion in this Assembly. It's also with a heavy and hopeful heart that I bring Motion 504 forward and urge my colleagues to support it as it's an issue of great importance to not only the constituents of Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo but also to many Albertans in all constituencies.

In just two weeks it marks the second anniversary of a horrific accident on highway 63 that killed seven people. Four occupants of one car, driven by Pastor Shannon Wheaton, were killed when it was struck head-on by another vehicle that passed into their lane, including Pastor Wheaton; his wife, Trena; their two-year-old son; and their pregnant friend, Courtney Penney. Three people in the other vehicle were also killed. The Wheaton's three-year-old son survived, an orphan, as did Ms Penney's husband, Mark. I'm not trying to be ghoulish by invoking their memory; I'm just trying to put a human face on an all-too-common tragedy.

Police believe excessive speed to be a factor in many fatalities. My constituents, many of whom have become inured to traffic fatalities on highway 63, were left reeling in the wake of that dreadful accident, which made headlines across Canada. There was in the weeks that followed a tremendous conversation about traffic safety on the so-called highway of death. I myself was asked by the Premier to prepare a report that would examine necessary approaches to improving traffic safety on highway 63, which was then submitted on June 29, 2012.

To its credit, Mr. Speaker, this government has committed to twinning the portion of highway 63 from Grassland north to Fort McMurray by 2016. In order to complete this project, intended to help address the carnage that is all too common on this highway, the government borrowed in excess of \$600 million for an expedited construction program. Having driven highway 63 as recently as yesterday, I can say that tremendous progress has occurred in the last 12 months. The government has also stepped up enforcement by adding dedicated RCMP and sheriff units on

highway 63 as well as aerial enforcement where that can be used effectively. My constituents and I are grateful.

The public advocacy group Coalition for a Safer 63 and 881 was born from tragedy, and citizens and employers across Wood Buffalo have joined together to develop public awareness campaigns such as the pledge, in which individuals are asked to pledge that they will drive safely to protect themselves and others. But idiot-proofing this highway will not be achieved with the mere addition of additional lanes of traffic in each direction. Greater enforcement, while it appears to have reduced the number of irresponsible speeders and has changed somewhat the culture of the drivers on that highway, also appears insufficient so far as to persuade the worst offenders to slow down, and the pledge is only taken by those for whom personal and public safety is already a priority.

Highway 63 is not the only roadway in Alberta on which traffic fatalities are all too common, Mr. Speaker. It is a distressing and disappointing fact that over 1 in 4 fatal collisions on Alberta highways involve a driver travelling at an unsafe speed. In Edmonton 56 per cent of traffic fatalities involve speeding. This morning alone there was a traffic ticket issued to a driver in Edmonton doing 170 kilometres an hour. When motorists callously and selfishly disregard speed limits, they put innocent people at risk in addition to themselves.

Our traffic codes, no less than our criminal justice system, rely on the basic principles of retribution and deterrence. When someone has ignored the rules of the road and is caught by a police officer or sheriff, they're ticketed. If the offence is sufficiently serious, the driver must also appear before a judge to face the possibility of further punishment. But it strikes me, Mr. Speaker, that there is a compromising inequity between our existing fine structure and the offences for which those fines are imposed.

For example, running a red light will earn a driver a \$287 fine and three demerit points. In fact, a rolling stop at a stop sign, which would involve speeds below 10 kilometres an hour, will earn a driver the same fine. Driving 50 kilometres above the posted speed limit will earn a driver a \$351 fine and six demerits, an increase of less than \$70. For every 10 kilometres a driver exceeds the speed limit, simple physics demonstrate that this driver ensures any resulting collision will have 10 times the force, greatly increasing the likelihood of serious injury or death.

Mr. Speaker, let me give the members assembled some statistics to illustrate the gravity of the problem of excessive speeding. In 2010 20.6 per cent of drivers in fatal collisions and 23 per cent of those in injury collisions on highway 63 were travelling at excessive speeds. One enforcement blitz weekend, May 3 to 6 of last year, officers issued 552 speeding tickets between Redwater and Fort McMurray, 95 of which were for hazardous driving, including excessive speed. One ticket was issued to the driver of a vehicle that clocked at 228 kilometres per hour.

This is not simply a problem in my constituency, Mr. Speaker. In 2012 27.4 per cent of drivers in fatal collisions across Alberta were travelling at excessive speeds. In other words, though there are proportionally more fatalities on highway 63 than other Alberta highways, excessive speed is actually at fault more often on highways 2, 3, 16, 22, 43; you name it. Speed kills. Though I do not have quantifiable data to demonstrate the point I'm about to make, there is far too much anecdotal evidence to indicate that those drivers most likely to use excessive speed on Alberta's highways are not deterred by our present traffic code, existing fines, or demerit points.

Fines levied have not kept up with inflation. The cost of changing the oil in your car has gone up with inflation while the

cost of burning rubber on your car has stayed flat. Too often it is said of and by excessive speeders on highway 63 that a fine equivalent to four hours' wages, where there's no guarantee they'll be caught, is woefully inadequate. It's play money, as easily dumped behind the wheel of a speeding car as it is in a run of bad luck amusing oneself at the blackjack table, except that occasional blackjack players do not gamble with other people's lives. In short, \$351 is not enough to make chronic offenders bat an eye.

Mr. Speaker, it's time for this government to increase the penalties for driving at unsafe speeds on all Alberta roadways and highways. It is time to adopt measures that are sufficiently heavy to act as a deterrent. Critics of this initiative will argue that drivers who exceed the speed limit by 50 kilometres or more are already liable for additional penalty since the offence includes a mandatory appearance before a judge; however, these penalties are left to the discretion of the judiciary and in some cases are based on the average income of all Albertans, which may not apply, for example, to excessive speeders in my constituency, which has the highest average wages in the country. Regardless, considering the tremendous danger to public safety that excessive speeding creates, higher base penalties are appropriate in and of themselves.

Three provinces – British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec – have recently imposed much stiffer penalties for excessive speeding, including the threat of seizure or suspension. Ontario, for example, imposes fines nearly 40 per cent higher. In Quebec fines are as much as three times the norm in Alberta. All three jurisdictions have a registry system to increase fines for repeat offenders.

The Alberta Association of Police Governance also passed a resolution in 2013 calling on the province to increase the penalties for excessive speeding. Let me be clear, however. Knowing that members of this Assembly have already conducted their own research that will have identified the full range of penalties requested by the Alberta Association of Police Governance and imposed by B.C., Ontario, and Quebec, I am not in this initiative advocating for seizure or immediate suspension. I am advocating for stiffer penalties for excessive speeding and dangerous driving to be imposed by the judiciary during the mandatory court appearance required for any driver travelling at speeds 50 kilometres above the posted speed limit.

In 2007, Mr. Speaker, Alberta's Solicitor General said that he wanted to review the data from jurisdictions that have imposed stiffer penalties before introducing the same here in Alberta. Now is the time. The data is available. The prevailing will of Albertans is behind this initiative.

5:10

I've conducted a public consultation in my constituency, both in 2012 and recently, to assess the opinion of the public towards stiffer penalties for excessive speeding. The response I have received from the citizens of Wood Buffalo and Albertans across this great province has not been . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The speaking order will be the hon. Minister of Justice, followed by Livingstone-Macleod, followed by Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to speak to Motion 504, urging the government to introduce amendments to the Traffic Safety Act, allowing harsher

penalties to be imposed on drivers found guilty of excessive speeding in order to deter high-risk driving behaviours on Alberta's highways. I wanted to thank the member for his comments and for bringing this motion forward. Traffic safety is something this government does take very seriously. It's something that was engrained in me as a kid, when my dad worked in the insurance business.

This member will recall that last year we funded 16 new officers for integrated traffic units that patrol highway 63. I've driven that highway before, and it can be a very dangerous highway, frankly, as can highway 2, that I drive often, between Calgary and Edmonton. This year as well we're providing resources to hire 40 new RCMP officers to be deployed across the province, and of course a lot of their work will involve traffic.

Just as enforcement is one piece of safe highway travel, so too is driver behaviour, Mr. Speaker. In 2012 the Wood Buffalo and Boyle-Redwater integrated traffic unit issued about 24,000 traffic charges. Of those, about 15,000 charges were issued along highway 63, showing again that driver behaviour on that particular roadway is a problem.

Currently, Mr. Speaker, the penalty for speeding 40 kilometres over the limit is \$273 and four demerit points. Of course, if you get 15 demerit points within the course of two years, you will lose your licence for 30 days. The penalty increases to \$351 and six points if you're speeding 50 kilometres over the limit. What's most important there is that the existing law requires that if you're speeding 50 kilometres over the limit, you get a mandatory court appearance, which can involve an additional sanction as well. If a police officer believes that the driver was engaged in a race or was driving for a bet or a wager, the vehicle may be seized immediately by the police regardless of the speed. Law enforcement in Alberta can apply penalties under the Criminal Code of Canada as well. For example, a conviction for operating a vehicle that is dangerous to the public can result in a five-year prison term.

Now, there was some talk about vehicle seizures over the last year, Mr. Speaker. We provide many tools for law enforcement to crack down on serious offenders in traffic safety. One tool that other provinces use is that they impound vehicles for excessive speeds. For example, in B.C. if you're going more than 40 kilometres over the limit, your vehicle will be impounded immediately by the officer. Now, I personally believe that without clear evidence that this has enhanced road safety, vehicle impoundment is a measure that goes too far. I believe in evidence-based legislation like how our drunk-driving law was based on evidence that it would reduce fatalities, and it actually has. But in this particular case I would add that in serious infractions, where racing is involved, the vehicle could already be seized. I don't think that we should be seizing vehicles for just being 40 kilometres over the limit because that hasn't been shown one way or the other to bring the speeds down.

Now, Mr. Speaker, one thing to consider is that our justice system is currently under considerable strain, largely because of the number of people that keep moving to this province. It is conducting a number of initiatives to manage serious systemic overload and consequent delays. One key cause of delay is the resource drain associated with the prosecution of a high volume of relatively low-severity offences such as speeding. These offences already consume a disproportionate amount of scarce judicial, prosecutorial, and enforcement resources. Increasing penalties associated with speeding would likely increase the number of trials to be heard and further exacerbate current systemic issues. However, I am pleased that we are making progress on how many of these issues are dealt with thanks to the hard work of many

people in my department, particularly Mr. Greg Lepp, Alberta's chief Crown prosecutor.

We're also looking at making reforms to traffic court. Despite criticism from some criminal defence lawyers we will continue to make traffic court more accessible for Albertans, with the overall goal of enhancing their access to justice. Despite the fearmongering from some members that I just heard from here, Albertans will continue to be able to fight a traffic ticket before a court of law.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I strongly support that the spirit of this motion is to deter high-risk driving behaviours. There are numerous tools that can be used to achieve this. Some I agree with, and some, I believe, would require more evidence before convincing me of their effectiveness such as automatic vehicle seizures. I do note that other provinces have fines for excessive speeding that exceed \$1,000, but I also believe that we could look at going in the direction of higher fines. That is something that I think our departments, between myself and the Minister of Transportation, could examine. It has been many years since the dollar values of traffic fines have been adjusted.

I wanted to thank the member for bringing up this important topic, and I will be supporting it because I do think that this is something that we need to continually look at in Alberta. We do have some very fast roadways here, Mr. Speaker. Highway 63, that the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo mentioned, is one of them, but we also have to take a panprovincial perspective on what actually is going to improve road safety. Cars aren't going away any time soon. We have to make sure that things are safer for people who drive vehicles, for people who are passengers, and, of course, for pedestrians.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Stier: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Good afternoon, everyone. I, too, would like to thank the hon. member for bringing this interesting topic forward for discussion. It's an interesting discussion once you think about some of the little intricacies that there are. I'd also like to thank the Solicitor General for his comments as well. I think they're well worth noting.

As we know, this essentially calls for an increase in the penalties imposed on drivers caught doing 50 kilometres or more over the limit. It basically encourages the government, therefore, to introduce amendments to the Traffic Safety Act to allow for harsher penalties. While I have reservations about these changes to some degree, I certainly would look at these amendments, should this motion be approved, with some interest because it certainly is a complicated topic.

Just to quickly review – and I think the other speakers have said this very clearly – the current rules in the Traffic Safety Act and in the use of highway and rules of the road regulation and in the Provincial Offences Procedure Act and in the procedures regulation provide that where a speeding ticket is issued in accordance with the table of values, they can fine for these types of things up to a maximum of \$306, as was mentioned. These types of offences can also give six demerits for that kind of situation as well.

Further, as was mentioned, too, where they do exceed the speed limit by more than 50 kilometres an hour, the person is already required to appear before a justice without the alternative of making a voluntary payment. There are certainly some rules in place that, one would think, would be adequate. Unfortunately, from the figures that were just mentioned in the House by the

other speakers, the public seems to definitely be at risk. Currently the fines, obviously, therefore seem not to be significant enough for some. Despite the fact that 50 kilometres over the limit means a six-demerit penalty and that later on 15 demerits means a licence suspension, it obviously doesn't seem to be doing the job that we hoped it would.

However, this motion as it is seems a little bit vague to me. It talks about things in generalities, and it does not necessarily talk about some of the things, as was mentioned by the other speakers as well, in terms of vehicle seizures and so on. I do understand that that was left out for a reason, and I think it may be prudent to look at that for a moment because the immediate seizure of vehicles and the impoundment would mean quite an administrative cost to the province and to the public and tie up police and towing and impound resources and so on.

Despite those observations and the reservations I have, it does target only the most careless and dangerous speeders, and I think that's an appropriate thing. With the automatic court appearance, this could allow judges to actually deliver stiffer penalties, which may be worth while to consider. If that is imposed in the amendments that might come forward, they would be something I would be keen to review at that time. You know, there would be discretion for the government over what those sanctions would be in the regulations coming up, I would think.

This seems to be where Albertans are paying a toll to speed these days, and the penalty doesn't seem to be a good enough deterrent. Taking all this into account, I therefore support the motion, and I look forward to the possible amendments as a result if this motion passes.

Thank you very much.

5:20

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Next the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by Calgary-Foothills, followed by Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Motion 504, regarding higher fines for speeders. I just want to take a moment here to thank the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo for bringing this motion forward and for all the work that he's done to bring attention to the dangers of highway 63 and especially to speeding on Alberta's highways.

Now, having said that, I'd like to go through specifically and just talk about a few points, Mr. Speaker. You know, I may add that I am with the member a hundred per cent in spirit behind this bill. I have a few questions for him, but I'm definitely leaning toward making Alberta highways safer.

One of the challenges, Mr. Speaker, is, first of all, that I'm not sure if speeding fines and increasing fines are a deterrent for those that are the most dangerous on Alberta highways and those that are in a rush to get to where they're going. I think, you know, that for folks who are speeding, especially when we look at, again, many of the ladies and gentlemen who work up in the Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo region, I'm not sure if increasing a fine by a couple of hundred dollars is going to be an effective deterrent.

I do want to reference that back in 2010 British Columbia brought in legislation that allowed police to seize vehicles from people caught driving more than 40 kilometres an hour over the posted speed limit. Now, I am going to talk about this, and I'm not necessarily in favour of immediate vehicle seizure because that skips the process of due process. I believe that every Albertan is entitled to that, you know, to innocence before guilt.

However, what's interesting about B.C.'s legislation is that within one year the number of fatality- and injury-related crashes in the province was cut in half. You know, the Solicitor General asked for proof. Well, reducing the number of fatalities and injuries from excessive speeding and the fact that B.C. did it and reduced their numbers by 50 per cent after introducing this legislation shows that maybe we don't have the appropriate deterrents in the province at the moment for cutting back some of our reckless or heavy-footed Albertans.

Having said that, I do want to qualify that obviously this isn't every Albertan and that obviously there are many that tend to drive safely, but it seems that the only way to stop people from speeding is to take them off the road completely. Now, while seizing a vehicle or taking away a licence is one way to do it – you can't speed if you can't drive – it's also important that we advocate for mass transportation means, alternative means, whether that's carpools, trains, HOV lanes, et cetera, which is a way to take excessive speeders off the road.

I just want to cite – and I recognize my time is short – that the state of Georgia had the Super Speeder Law, and it's the best comparison, from what I've found, to this current motion. Under this particular law anyone caught speeding at 75 miles an hour or over on a two-lane road where 55 miles per hour is the typical posted rate – so we're talking 20 miles per hour or more – is subject to an additional \$200 fine on top of the general fines for speeding. Now, the fees collected under the Super Speeder Law are intended to be used to help Georgia's trauma care hospital system, where approximately 60 per cent of all trauma care patients are crash related, which is a surprisingly high number, Mr. Speaker. Similar proposals have been mentioned for fines collected within our province.

Now, impressively, since the Super Speeder Law went into effect, Georgia has racked up nearly 23,000 Super Speeder cases and more than \$34 million. However, as advertised, the law has not had the intended consequence or the intended effect of reducing speed on state highways though the upside is that it's become, you know, a lucrative source of income and, again, income that is going toward funding the hospital. The root cause or the purpose behind this law is not achieving the results that they had hoped.

State troopers have said: "Society doesn't slow down. Society is always in a hurry. As a matter of fact, when we stop a lot of people, the common response is: 'Can you go ahead and write my ticket and . . . get me on my way? I was late for something.'" I mean, this U.S. law seems like a good example of the effects that the proposed motion would create, but as we see, fines alone aren't necessarily going to make people drive better or slower. Again, the proposed legislation would only give out a fine, without the added benefit of giving the power of a potential seizure like in B.C. and Ontario.

Now, I want to give one of my suggestions or proposals, because I, too, don't believe in immediate vehicle seizure. I mean, there could be challenges with the photoradar gun if it wasn't calibrated properly, et cetera. But I think one way to meet in the middle is looking at, you know, vehicle seizure upon conviction, still going through the proper steps but for drivers to know that if they are speeding excessively, they will in fact have a consequence or a penalty stronger than just a monetary fine, that they will lose their vehicle.

Let's see here. I'm sure I'm running short of time. You know, again, one of the ideas or suggestions that comes out often is looking at driver education or increasing that. Sometimes it doesn't matter how much education we give folks; it's not going

to change their driving habits or their driving behaviour. I think educational programs will put a dent in the problem of speeding. When we look at examples of, say, either smoking and drinking or drinking and driving, education still has had mixed results.

As well, there are others that have put forward the idea of increasing the posted rates of speed. I don't think that's an effective way. The tendency would be that if people get an extra 20 kilometres an hour to buffer, then they'll just take another 20 on top of that if they are speeding excessively.

One question would be, again, potentially looking at photoradar. I believe that when the Minister of Infrastructure was Minister of Transportation, he said that he'd be open to using photoradar on 63 but not any other rural highway. It's interesting that it's okay for one highway but not others. Now, again, this may be one deterrent. Maybe at the end of the day the approach is a multifaceted way of trying to head this off.

I will support this motion because I do believe it's a step in the right direction. I think that we do need to acknowledge that monetary fines aren't necessarily a strong deterrent for drivers, and there are, you know, lots of examples of this.

I will ask a couple of questions, if I can find them, and read them into *Hansard*. Of course, at the moment I can't find them, but one of them was to look at ways that we can deter speeding other than just increasing fines: looking at HOV lanes; looking at improving mass transit, rapid transit; looking at possibly rail. Again, upon conviction, would seizure of a vehicle, loss of a vehicle for a certain period of time also be a deterrent for those speeding down the road?

I will say that I have spoken with families who have lost family members on highway 63 primarily due to speeding. I know that they've been pushing and have done incredible advocacy work to have all MLAs in this House address the fact of how dangerous 63 is. But I do appreciate that we do have other highways that are dangerous as well.

I want to thank the member for this motion. I will be supporting this, but I would like to look at other ways to deter excessive speeding. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

5:30

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, we have 25 minutes left, and I have quite a list of speakers. The next three speakers in order will be the Member for Calgary-Foothills, followed by Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Webber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll be short. I do stand in favour of Motion 504, put forward by my colleague from Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, and I thank you, hon. member, for bringing this to the attention of the Assembly. Almost every year we hear of horrible death and injury accidents that occur on Alberta's highways. I see many of these in my travels back and forth from here in Edmonton to my constituency in Calgary. Police believe excessive speed to have been the major factor in many of these accidents.

The QE II corridor between Calgary and Edmonton is a very busy one, as you know, Mr. Speaker, and it is a key economic route for this province. As I drove back to Calgary just last week, while the snow, of course, has melted, I saw on the shoulders of the highway debris strewn throughout, on the sides of the highway and into the ditches, and that has occurred from all the various accidents over the winter months. As we all know, excessive speed seems to have played an important role in most of these cases. As this highway is twinned and has fencing between the

north and south roads, the issue most responsible is excessive speed for the road conditions or dangerous driving habits.

Highway 63 is not the only roadway in Alberta on which traffic fatalities are all too common. We see it all over the province, Mr. Speaker. It is a fact that over 1 in 4 fatal collisions on Alberta highways involve a driver travelling at an unsafe speed. When motorists callously and selfishly disregard speed limits, they put innocent people at risk in addition to themselves. I ask myself: is where they are going more important than the lives of the other drivers on the road?

Already when someone has ignored the rules of the road and is caught, they are ticketed, of course. If the offence is viewed as more serious by the enforcement officer, the driver must appear before the courts to face the possibility of further punishment, but it appears that the fines are just not harsh enough. In 2012, Mr. Speaker, 27.4 per cent of drivers in fatal collisions across Alberta were travelling at an excessive speed. Clearly, the fine is just not enough of a deterrent. This \$350 fine is just not enough to make chronic offenders bat an eye.

Mr. Speaker, I do agree with the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. It is time for this government to increase the penalties for driving at unsafe speeds on all Alberta highways and roadways. It is time to adopt measures that are sufficiently heavy to act as a deterrent.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Minister of Transportation.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm also pleased to rise and speak to Motion 504 from the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. I learned quite a bit from reading the briefings on this well-researched motion. I'll just summarize a few for the record.

This motion would preserve the assumption of innocence until the individuals get their day in court. It does nothing about subverting that issue.

Statistics show that as of 2010 between 21 and 24 per cent of drivers in injury collisions were travelling at an unsafe speed. That's a very substantial proportion of injuries caused by speed or at least contributed to by speed. Between January 2013 and January 2014 11,000 tickets were issued by police just in the Wood Buffalo area, 10,000 of them for speeding. About 90 per cent of the tickets handed out were for speeding in that area, 228 of those in excess of 50 kilometres an hour over the speed limit, with speeds as high as 228 kilometres an hour.

The Alberta Association of Police Governance passed a motion in 2013 calling on the government to "enhance deterrent measures for excessive speeding within the Traffic Safety Act." It's interesting to note that Ontario is taking this to another level in terms of their fines, which range between \$2,000 and \$10,000, compared to our \$350, in addition to a licence suspension, a seven-day vehicle seizure, six demerit points, up to six months in jail, and up to two years of licence suspension for a first conviction for speeding in excess of 50 kilometres over the speed limit.

The purpose, as indicated, of Motion 504 is to "urge the government to introduce amendments to the Traffic Safety Act allowing harsher penalties to be imposed on drivers [caught speeding excessively] to deter high-risk driving behaviours on Alberta's highways." It seems eminently reasonable to me that if individuals do not understand the risk they're putting themselves

and others at, there should be a much higher fine than \$350 and a few demerit points, commensurate with this government's response to driving under the influence, where they dropped the level of acceptable alcohol from .08 to .05. I think the significance of speeding, especially speeding over 50 kilometres higher than the speed limit, warrants that kind of serious attention and serious penalties.

There was a story once circulating on the Internet that the best deterrent is a six-inch spike sticking out of the steering column. In some respects, I understand that. If there was a spike sticking out at drivers, they would tend to drive slower speeds. If our own fear, in other words, was in our consciousness with respect to the damage of injuries, most of us would drive differently. Unfortunately, we need to be reminded of that in many different ways. One is through the pocketbook, and another is through restricting the use of the vehicle with licence removal. I personally think that this is just one step towards what our future societal demands will be for the kind of destruction that speeders are creating in our society, not only human suffering and death and disability but tremendous costs to a health care system whose costs are already burgeoning out of control.

I have no hesitation in supporting this fairly conservative, I would call it, decision on penalizing these high speeders. I would even entertain some of the other measures that Ontario is bringing to bear, notwithstanding that what is really needed is a stronger educational process among schoolchildren and adolescents around risk-taking and the recognition, I guess, in more concrete ways of the kinds of responsibilities that young people and all of us are taking on when we get behind the wheel of a car or any vehicle, the responsibilities we take on not only for ourselves but for everyone in society.

This is a very short-term, front-end penalty that's being promoted. There are a number of different issues that relate to prevention and behaviour change that I think we should also be considering, that the Transportation ministry should be considering. I don't know what currently is happening within the administration, but we need to look at all manner of prevention in our society, and this is one other area that I think is deficient in our investment in prevention programs and prevention behaviour, the state-of-the-art prevention behaviour challenges.

I'll be supporting this motion, and I thank the member for bringing it forward. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Minister of Transportation.

5:40

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise today to speak to Motion 504, proposed by the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. Motion 504 calls on the government to amend the Traffic Safety Act in order to deter excessive speeding on our roadways. It aims to do this by calling for harsher penalties to be levied on drivers who are guilty of excessive speeding. As Minister of Transportation I can tell this Assembly that I take traffic safety very seriously. Even one fatality is one too many, in my mind, and I'm pleased to be able to contribute to this important debate today.

Mr. Speaker, 2011 was the Year of Road Safety in Canada, where a number of initiatives were introduced to improve road safety. One such effort was the development of the road safety strategy 2015. The strategy was developed by the Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators in consultation with various government members, law enforcement, engineers, and other key stakeholders from across Canada. The main purpose of

the strategy is to achieve an overall yearly downward trend in fatalities and serious injuries caused by vehicle collisions.

The strategy involves enhancing enforcement measures, raising public awareness, and promoting a commitment to road safety by focusing on the areas of greatest concern, which include drinking and driving, excessive speeding, and non-use of seatbelts. Recent indications suggest that we are making significant progress, with fatalities 6 per cent lower than the baseline and serious injuries 15 per cent lower nationally.

Mr. Speaker, the Canadian road safety strategy has identified speed and aggressive driving as the leading contributing factors to motor vehicle collisions. That is why the Alberta Traffic Safety Act contains significant penalties for excessive speeding. We have substantial fines and demerit points in place as consequences, which increase in severity along with speed. For example, speeding over 50 kilometres per hour above the posted speed limit will currently result in a mandatory court appearance, and if you're convicted, the court will determine the fine, and six demerit points will be recorded against the operator's licence.

There are also programs in place for drivers who repeatedly commit serious offences or begin to show a pattern of driving violations and collisions. They include mandatory retesting and appearances before the Alberta Transportation Safety Board.

Specific to enforcement, the Alberta traffic safety plan recommends implementing integrated enforcement strategies to target high-risk locations and target offenders by using enhanced data collection to develop enforcement plans specific to high-collision areas. The traffic safety plan takes a safer system approach, encouraging a better understanding of how the three elements of our road system – drivers, vehicles, and the roadways themselves – interact. The co-ordination of public education and activities in tandem with enforcement programs and roads that are designed, engineered, maintained, and operated for safety help to make us all safer on the road.

Mr. Speaker, the net result of these traffic safety initiatives here in Alberta is a 25 per cent reduction in traffic fatalities since 2007. Further to that, serious injuries have decreased by 26 per cent, intersection-related fatalities have decreased by 24 per cent, alcohol-related fatalities have decreased by 39 per cent, and speed-related fatalities have decreased by 16 per cent, all of this despite a significant increase in the number of drivers and vehicles on our roadways during that time. To me, this proves that our strategies are having a positive effect on road safety in our province, but we can always do more.

My department is currently conducting a comprehensive review of the Traffic Safety Act. Part of this review includes continuing to conduct research with respect to excessive speeding and other high-risk driving behaviours. Phase 3 of the review will include substantive policy amendments to the entire act and public consultation on those proposed amendments. Mr. Speaker, we would consider an amendment to increase the penalty to excessive high-risk speeders to be a substantial policy amendment. We know that excessive speeding is one of a number of high-risk driving behaviours that puts the public at risk, including non-use of seatbelts, impaired driving, and running red lights and stop signs. All of these high-risk behaviours should be considered under phase 3 of our Traffic Safety Act review, and as such I can commit today that we'll do just that.

Mr. Speaker, as MLAs we can certainly appreciate how much we all depend on our vehicles and our vast network of roads. Last year alone I drove hundreds of kilometres all over this great province, and one thing remains constant: road safety is dependent on all Albertans taking the time to slow down. We as Albertans are the cure to making Alberta's roads safer for all who use them.

I want to thank the hon. member for his commitment to traffic safety. This is an important debate, and I look forward to hearing from the rest of my hon. colleagues.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

I recognize the hon. Associate Minister – Accountability, Transparency and Transformation.

Mr. Scott: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise today to speak in support of Motion 504, proposed by the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. Motion 504 calls on the government to amend the Traffic Safety Act in order to curb excessive speeding on our roadways. The overall intention is to deter high-risk drivers on Alberta's roadways and to improve upon general road-user behaviour. Given the occurrence of speed-related traffic incidents on highways this motion seeks to give law enforcement another tool to ensure that Alberta roads are safe for all those who use them. Simply consider the challenges posed by highway 63 to and from Fort McMurray. This is something that the person who has proposed the motion, my colleague, and I know first-hand.

Excessive speeding carries with it various interpretations in many different jurisdictions. In British Columbia excessive speeding is outlined in section 148 of the Motor Vehicle Act and is defined as driving at a speed greater than 40 kilometres per hour over the posted speed limit. A person who drives a motor vehicle on a highway at a speed greater than 40 kilometres per hour over the posted speed limit commits an offence and is liable to conviction. The B.C. Motor Vehicle Act outlines the fines as follows. Exceeding the driving limit by more than 40 kilometres per hour is a fine of \$368 plus the penalty of three demerit points on his or her driving record. Exceeding the driving limit by more than 60 kilometres per hour is a fine of \$483 plus the penalty of three demerit points on his or her driving record.

Additionally, excessive speeding of this nature will result in the immediate impoundment of the user's vehicle along with the following costs: seven days for a first offence plus towing and storage costs in the amount of \$210, 30 days for a second offence within a two-year period plus towing and storage costs of approximately \$700, and 60 days for any subsequent offences within two years plus towing and storage costs of over \$1,200. B.C. has stated that speed is one of the leading causes of death on its roads. Accordingly, their legislation and regulations reflect the government's level of concern for ensuring roads remain safe for all who use them.

Mr. Speaker, in Quebec the Highway Safety Code stipulates that excessive speeding is travelling at 40 kilometres per hour or more over the speed limit in a zone of 60 kilometres per hour or less, 50 kilometres per hour or more over the speed limit in a zone of 60 kilometres per hour but not more than 90 kilometres per hour, and 60 kilometres per hour or more over the speed limit in a zone of 100 kilometres per hour or more. A peace officer shall immediately suspend for a period of seven days the licence of any person who commits an offence in accordance with the traffic safety code. The suspension period is increased from seven to 30 days when a user commits a repeat offence within a 10-year period. This suspension can also be increased to as much as 60 days if the user is convicted of more than one speeding offence. The fines for excessive speeding in Quebec begin at \$541 and can increase to as much as \$1,277. Demerit points are also given and start at six, ranging to 14, for excessively exceeding the speed limit in Quebec.

Comparatively, Alberta's Traffic Safety Act contains penalties for excessive speeding such as substantial fines and demerit points which increase with the speed of the vehicle. Mr. Speaker, for example, speeding over 50 kilometres per hour above the posted speed limit will currently result in a mandatory court appearance. If convicted, the court will determine the fine and six demerit points will be recorded against the operator's licence. This sentence is three points more severe than the starting-point demerit system practices in B.C. for excessive speeding and is at par with practices in Quebec.

5:50

Increased deterrence for excessive speeding has been a goal of police services throughout our province for many years. I share that goal. The safety of all Albertans on highways and roads is important to all families and communities, and our government sees this as an important initiative. As a part of the government's capital plan investment Budget 2014 provides \$5 billion for the provincial highway network, including road rehabilitation and the twinning of highway 63, so that Albertans have the safest roads to drive on.

I believe it is prudent to revisit the amounts violators can be fined. There are other measures that can be examined, but these are alternatives that we ought to be considering carefully as we decide whether to pursue the course of action that Motion 504 is urging. We would need to be very clear as to how these harsher penalties would be determined and administered, consulting not only with stakeholders but also with the public. Regardless of how such amendments to the current legislation would be carried out in practice, I am nevertheless sure that all hon. members in this House would agree that traffic safety should be a continuing priority moving forward as our population increases and, with it, the traffic on our roads.

I congratulate the hon. member's commitment to traffic safety as demonstrated by his sponsorship of this motion, and I look forward to hearing the remainder of the debate. I support this motion and its intent to make our roads safer.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister. We have approximately three minutes if anyone else would like to speak to this motion.

If not, then I would ask the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo to close debate. You have five minutes.

Mr. Allen: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd particularly like to thank all of the members of this Assembly from all caucuses that spoke to Motion 504. As I mentioned before, the responses that I received from the citizens of Wood Buffalo and Albertans across this great province – I mean, I did a significant amount of consultation during the highway 63 report in 2012, and a great deal came across in social media. We did a telephone town hall. That's all posted online as well. You don't have to FOIP that, members.

There are some that feel quite passionately that they should be able to speed as much as they want under certain circumstances – say, passing a vehicle or whatever – but collectively the response of ordinary Albertans has been in favour of stiffer penalties. We

had a number of comments as well that ranged from having vehicle crushers on the side of the road or public floggings, so certainly we're not advocating for any of that. But, by and large, Albertans have no tolerance for excessive speeders, who put the lives of others at risk in addition to their own.

Mr. Speaker, I said often when I was preparing the report that it was not just to twin highway 63, but it was to come across with a plan, and that's why the plan was called Towards a Safer 63. That plan was multifaceted as well. I said at the time that I'd be damned if I'd have any involvement in a project that was going to build a four-lane speedway because as we all know as well, all you're doing is opening that up to additional collisions. Fatalities or not, it puts higher costs and higher pressure on our emergency services. On highway 63 that's a particularly strong issue because there are 200 kilometres of nothing from Fort McMurray all the way to Wandering River. In fact, the number of collisions that were occurring caused one of our volunteer fire departments a great deal of stress, so they no longer respond to motor vehicle collisions on highway 63.

Albertans want to see these penalties increased. Albertans want their roads and highways to be safer for themselves, their friends, and their families.

I thank again all the members that spoke, in particular the Minister of Transportation, from Grande Prairie-Wapiti, for some of your comments and your commitment towards making all Alberta highways safer. As you mentioned, the plan that you've been putting forward with your department is having a noticeable effect. It is having results, and we see those results. But as the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview mentioned, we do need to look at a multifaceted approach, one that includes increased levels of enforcement, the advertising and marketing that you spoke of in estimates, but, I believe as well, significant fines. In Ontario alone they showed, when they put advertising out, that with their new plan of vehicle seizure and \$10,000 fines, there was a significant drop in speeding on highway 401.

The Minister of Justice and Solicitor General indicated that there were challenges around the judicial resources. I would argue that making the fines significant will in fact relieve some of the pressure on our judicial resources.

Again, Mr. Speaker, I thank all members for speaking to this, and I urge you all to support this motion. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 504 carried]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Government House Leader, were you trying to get my attention?

Mr. Campbell: Yeah. Well, we'll call it a night, Mr. Speaker, and we'll adjourn until tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

The Deputy Speaker: The legislative policy committee on Alberta's Economic Future will convene at 7 p.m. in committee room A for consideration of the main estimates of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:56 p.m. to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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