



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday afternoon, March 16, 2021

Day 85

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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Independent: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 16, 2021

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our Queen and to her government, to Members of the Legislative Assembly, and to all in positions of responsibility the guidance of Your spirit. May they never lead the province wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideas but, laying aside all private interest and prejudice, keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all.

Please be seated.

Members' Statements

Coal Development Policies

Ms Phillips: Mr. Speaker, we all know that the Premier spent Christmas in damage control when his ministers, MLAs, and chief of staff ignored public health direction to stay home and flew off to sunny climes in Hawaii, Mexico, and Arizona and trotting around London. But I do want the Premier to know that his flailing government gave my constituents in Lethbridge a lump of coal, well, many lumps of coal, actually.

The UCP was dead set on strip-mining our mountains and taking billions of litres of water and handing it to an Australian coal baron. In southern Alberta water equals jobs. It equals jobs now and in the future. Strip-mining mountains for coal does not. We barely make a dime on these mines, and the damage caused will ruin some of our most beautiful areas forever.

Now, thankfully, Lethbridge took notice of the secret coal plot and put a stop to it. They are now told of consultations to come although the Minister of Energy sure ducked and weaved when asked over and over again this morning whether those discussions would specifically involve people in southern Alberta. I find that strange, Mr. Speaker. There are few areas where the anger at the coal plot is greater than in Lethbridge.

Rather than listen to Lethbridge, the UCP appears to be ignoring them. There is no plan for jobs in Lethbridge in this budget. There's no plan to diversify, support our postsecondary institutions, support agriculture, which, if treated properly, can be a massive economic driver for the province. It has been two years. The people of Lethbridge have not gained a thing: not jobs, investments, not any diversification plan. All we have for two years is a plan to put jobs at risk, particularly in agriculture and anything that relies on water.

That is what the UCP is going to hear from the people of Lethbridge and all over southern Alberta during this piece of performance art they're calling a coal consultation if they have the courage to listen.

The Speaker: The hon. the Member for Red Deer-South.

Self-reliance and Preparedness

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I stand not in anger but to raise a voice of warning and of hope. Canada is spending itself into oblivion, adopting policies of economic self-destruction, wounding the capacity of its rainmaker partner, Alberta businesses and families, to provide for themselves and others. A socialist government, bankrupt of a principled vision of hope, threatens the freedom and prosperity of Alberta businesses and families.

But, Mr. Speaker, there is hope. We can trust in the truth that we are not defined by our circumstances, that we are free to act and improve them. When the world is in commotion, there is safety in true principles that carry us through to better days. One such principle is the virtue of preparation. Personal storehouses of physical preparedness improve self-reliance. Personal storehouses of spiritual preparation, available to all without cost, increase resilience. Prudent preparation is an antidote to fear. We need not be discouraged if we are not perfectly prepared – none of us are – but through experience we learn the merciful truth that great success is often found in the effort and not in a perfect outcome.

Now is the time to act as we seek opportunities to improve our preparedness. Even in small and simple ways those efforts can be magnified into outcomes that are great and marvellous. I know this is true. More preparedness and self-reliance bring more peace of conscience and more capacity to encourage and serve those around us in love.

Thank you.

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

Economic Recovery

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is a reason to be optimistic in Alberta, because Alberta's government has made a commitment on protecting lives and livelihoods. In my riding specifically we are thrilled by the announcement of the 65th Avenue interchange, a much-needed project in my constituency that will help facilitate future growth in the region.

The budget reaffirmed the province's commitment to expand the Leduc agrivalue incubator, which helps companies like Siwin Foods. Value-added agrifood exports play a key role in economic diversification, and this past year we saw an increase in agrifood production of 5.6 per cent over 2019.

But this is not all that's happening. Through the struggles of the past year it is exciting to see that our entrepreneurial spirit is still alive and well in our communities. The government has been looking at ways to support businesses and hard-working families in Alberta; for example, with the working parents benefit and the development of the Alberta economic recovery plan.

Other supports include the small and medium enterprise relaunch grant. This grant was expanded earlier this year to include new businesses who were impacted by public health restrictions. Prior to February this program has been able to support businesses to the tune of \$311 million to over 44,000 recipients. We have seen the tech sector emerge in Calgary with the recent announcements of mCloud and Infosys establishing national and regional headquarters.

BMO is projecting a 6 and a half per cent increase in GDP growth here in Alberta over 2021, National Bank projects Alberta to have an increase of 4.6 per cent in employment, and these projections are leading the country. These prospects should be encouraging to Albertans, especially as vaccinations are being rolled out more broadly. Through the difficulties of the previous year, for everything that has been endured, there is reason to be optimistic in Alberta.

Thank you.

Member for Red Deer-South's Remarks on COVID-19

Mr. Nielsen: "Truth is an antidote to fear." This is what the Member for Red Deer-South told this Assembly yesterday in a shocking member's statement that attempted once again to downplay the dangers of this pandemic and undermine public health orders. This is hardly new behaviour for the member.

Albertans remember vividly how he told Albertans to stay home and save lives over the holidays and then jumped on a plane to Phoenix for Christmas and then refused to apologize for his stunning hypocrisy.

Albertans remember how during the second wave, as cases were climbing, this member called public health measures a socialist lockdown and suggested that those who supported action to stop the huge growth in cases wanted a “police state lockdown.”

The Member for Red Deer-South complained how children are being subjected to excessive risk aversion. He talked about fear being used to compel compliance with restrictions. He accused doctors of using approaches designed for unhealthy individuals on healthy individuals. He accused the media of hysteria and seeking to leverage a narrative of fear, and he had the audacity to claim he’s speaking of hope and truth and love. It would be a joke if it wasn’t so serious.

Hardly a day has gone by where this member has not sought to divide and undermine our province’s response to this deadly pandemic that has tragically taken nearly 2,000 lives. Albertans have seen and felt the impact of this pandemic for over a year. Over 100,000 Albertans contracted this deadly virus, hundreds went to the ICU, lives have been lost, families have been devastated, and Albertans have struggled. Our heroes on the front lines of every sector worked day in and day out regardless of the risk, all while the member undermined them.

I call upon the Member for Red Deer-South to stop undermining and to join me in thanking the people of Alberta for the sacrifices they’ve made during this pandemic.

The Speaker: The hon. the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Bill 46 Health Information Use Provisions

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to rise and express my gratitude for Bill 46, the Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2020. Bill 46 was passed during the fall session of 2020 and has proven to be of high value in my riding, particularly in Lloydminster. The stated goals of this bill were as follows: putting patients and public interest first, protecting the privacy of health information, modernizing Alberta’s health system to better support patients, finding efficiencies, enhancing patient safety, and improving patient outcomes. This bill accomplished all of these objectives quite handily.

1:40

The main issue fixed for Lloydminster by this bill was the effective transfer of patient information interprovincially. Lloydminster hospital sits on the Saskatchewan side of the border and is under the jurisdiction of Saskatchewan. This has on occasion made accessing health care information of Alberta residents of Lloydminster difficult for Saskatchewan staff. [An electronic device sounded] At the same time, this has been a problem as regards to the timely and accurate treatment of Alberta residents. Until now no other Health minister has been prepared to resolve this important issue. Bill 46 has allowed the sharing of Netcare information with Saskatchewan, effectively solving the communication hiatus. In addition to easing communication, this bill saves money. Tests carried out on the Alberta side of the border will not have to be performed again due to lack of information sharing. I urge the Saskatchewan government to table similar legislation to enable a comprehensive sharing of patient medical information both ways. I very much appreciate the Alberta government solving this problem for Lloydminster, and I know my constituents appreciate it, too.

Finally, I would like to extend my personal thank you to the Minister of Health for his hard work and continued support in addressing all health issues unique to Lloydminster. This bill is but one example of how this government is serving the health needs of rural Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo would like to pay a fine to the charity of the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright’s choice with such a violation of that nature.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Calgary LRT Green Line

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The green line LRT in Calgary is a transformational project for the city that will connect communities from north to south and will be vital to Calgary’s recovery. It will get Calgarians back to work by creating 20,000 jobs at a time when they are desperately needed, and once constructed, it will connect Calgarians to jobs in the downtown core, reduce congestion on roads, and eliminate 30,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions.

But let’s not forget that the UCP gave themselves the ability to cancel funding for the green line without reason. The project has been studied multiple times, Mr. Speaker, has been a key issue in the last municipal election, and continues to receive the support of two-thirds of Calgarians. The project even survived an unsuccessful attempt by wealthy UCP-connected donors to kill it. After receiving a final realignment based on one study, the UCP still refuses to give the green light to the green line. Instead, they’ve thrown up more roadblocks and commissioned more studies that only delay the project further and risk missing this year’s construction season, pushing the project back by at least another year. Now the project sits in limbo as this government prays for a city council that will do the UCP’s bidding and kill the project.

In doing so, the UCP are selfishly forgoing 20,000 jobs and a project that will help build Calgary’s recovery and revitalize the downtown as the city faces record-high office vacancy rates. I find this absolutely stunning for a government that promised jobs and growth and economic recovery in the last election. They had no problem betting up to \$7.5 billion on Donald Trump’s re-election, but when it comes to the future of Calgary, this government has nothing for Calgarians. This is shameful. Premier, step up, do what you promised to do, and build the damn green line. It’s time to build Calgary for the future. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, even though the long-standing tradition of members’ statements is to go uninterrupted, I’m not sure the use of such language isn’t unparliamentary.

The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Holi

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to speak on the significance of the Holi festival. The festival Holi is an amazing tradition that marks the end of the winter and the beginning of spring season, symbolizing the blossoming of love. It is a day to meet others, laugh, play, forget, and forgive. Holi around the world is known for the colours, teaching humankind to transcend, forget old resentment, and meet others with a high spirit, offering great warmth.

As legends say, Holika was the sister of the demon king Hiranyakashipu, who plotted against his son Prahlada because he was a devotee to Lord Vishnu, who was a major Hindu deity that

reincarnated as Krishna. When they lit the fire intended to kill Prahlada, Holika was burned instead, and Prahlada was saved. Because of this significant event, many devotees across the world light ritual bonfires, which symbolize the burning of the evil spirit Holika and symbolize the triumph of good over evil that will always be remembered and celebrated during Holi.

Holi is a beautiful event that fills the entire atmosphere with vibrant colour and a cheerful environment where everyone is drenched in colour but more so in the spirit of Holi. Seeing the practices and traditions of others, Albertans help ensure strong social cohesion and foster acceptance in our society. We are very fortunate that this province supports and promotes diversity and multiculturalism, allowing us the freedom to publicly celebrate great traditions. It is my wish that many of us across the world have a blessed and happy Holi.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Stavely School Council

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. School councils play an important role in how our schools operate, and serving on one is a great way for parents to collaborate with administrators and other educational partners. School councils are also an integral method for members of the school community to consult and give advice to educational officials, which is important in tight rural communities like those found in Livingstone-Macleod.

Today I would like to congratulate the Stavely School Council for receiving the school council award of merit from the Alberta School Councils' Association. The school council award of merit recognizes the practices of the Stavely School Council and the impact these practices have had on supporting student learning and school improvements. This is a great honour, and the Stavely School Council should be very proud of their hard work and their efforts. The parents on the Stavely School Council along with parents on school councils across Livingstone-Macleod have done incredible work in providing hot lunches for students and on fundraising efforts that have helped provide students with additional supplies or to be able to go on many field trips.

The efforts by parents on school councils often get overlooked, but what they do is important in the lives of students and in their school experiences. The hard work that these parents have done, especially during these tough times of the pandemic, is even more admirable. Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the members of the Stavely School Council for this award and also congratulate the previous members of this council, whose hard work has set the foundation for this success.

Lastly, I would like to give a big thanks to school council members across Livingstone-Macleod and the province for their fantastic work and, of course, a massive thank you to our teachers, their aides, and other support staff who continue to provide world-class education for our students during this pandemic.

Thank you.

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

COVID-19 and Religious Observances

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are in trying times, and many churchgoers in Alberta feel pandemic fatigue. Some even feel attacked, pained, estranged. It has been a long, isolating year, and we all sorely miss in-person community. Scripture and spiritual tradition call us to connect to one another; the pandemic has forced us into temporary isolation. COVID restrictions have, for some,

created a tense relationship between state and church. As a former pastor I understand; as an MLA I hear these frustrations.

Jesus said: I did not come to take you out of this world. We are all in this world together. Our lives of faith intersect with life in this world, its peoples, and its governments. In striving for civil society, not civil disobedience, both state and church need to work together as we navigate the pandemic. We are to respect imperfect governors, indeed, to embrace a spirit of submission, not rebellion. Servitude and humility are the way of Jesus, not demanding my rights.

One core message of the gospel is to love others and consider them above ourselves. For most Christians and people of faith this includes voluntarily doing their part to prevent the spread of COVID to another, even though it means personal loss and restraint. Another essential theme in the Scriptures is that suffering often serves to purify and strengthen us. Yes, we are even called to embrace trials with thankfulness for the unseen, ultimate good they will bring.

Most faith communities fully respect COVID guidelines and abide by them willingly because, to quote a B.C. church leader, "This is not about rights snatched away from us by malevolent authorities; it is about rights freely relinquished for a season." In these times, Mr. Speaker, that means putting the safety of one another over our own comfort. Churches are a beacon of hope in times of crisis, and it is my hope that they will continue to be that beacon and lead by example with grace and wisdom.

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition has the call.

Coal Development Policies

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, it's warming up in Alberta, which must be concerning given that this Premier is on thin ice. He made a backroom deal with coal lobbyists to give our coal companies carte blanche over the eastern slopes, strip-mining our mountaintops without public notice, without public input. Now First Nation leaders, municipal councils, environmentalists, ranchers, and, yes, even the biggest stars in country music are standing up. Albertans have been clear. They do not want these mines. Will the Premier support our bill to ban future coal mining in the eastern slopes?

1:50

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, this government's policy with respect to responsible resource development in the province, including on the eastern slopes, is, as far as I can tell, the same as the previous NDP government's. In fact, just off the eastern slopes they permitted a brand new thermal coal mine. You know what? Let me credit the NDP. It was the right thing to do, and 500 families in the Hinton area have jobs because of it. They can put food on the table because of it. The NDP, their Energy minister wrote a letter to the joint review of a proposed renewed coal mine in the eastern slopes, down around Crowsnest Pass, supporting it. She was right to do that, too.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Premier is misinterpreting that letter, and he knows it.

What we also know is that hundreds of thousands of Albertans have since voiced their support for a ban, and we all have an obligation to listen to them. Meanwhile they worry that this government's so-called consultation is just a sham to allow more mining and for good reason because according to the registry, coal lobbyists have had more meetings with cabinet ministers. I'm sure

the rest of government caucus is actually getting a bit jealous. Premier, today in estimates your Energy minister dodged repeated requests to meet with southern Albertans. Will you directly tell her that she must meet with them in person?

The Speaker: Just prior to the Premier's response I might encourage him that if they're referring to certain documents, they might table them in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I think there's one thing that all Albertans have in common. That's a shared desire to protect our magnificent natural environment, particularly sensitive ecosystems, including those along the eastern slopes. But there's one thing we clearly do not have in common in this House, and that is the support for working people, including union members, in natural resource development. The NDP used to be the party of the working person, but now they've turned their backs on those good jobs, those union members who simply want the right to put food on their table through responsible resource development. Shame on the NDP.

Ms Notley: Well, let's talk about the tens of thousands of working people who rely on clean water in the Oldman basin. Ranching families are suing the Premier and his government because he's allowing these companies to drain the Oldman River basin for free. Mr. Speaker, ranchers who've been through severe droughts, who've had their licences pulled in tough times, are furious and rightly so. Premier, our bill would protect the Oldman watershed for all Albertans. Why won't you do the same?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, there's been absolutely no change with respect to provincial water quality regulations or laws. We have amongst the strictest environmental protection regimes in the world. Here's the difference. Albertans understand that we can protect and preserve our natural environment, particularly sensitive ecosystems, while allowing for responsible resource development, just as we have done in certain areas along the eastern slopes for 130 years. You know, the start of socialism in Alberta was in the coal mining unions. Now they've turned their back on their own history.

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

Ms Notley: And this government is turning its back on hundreds of thousands of Albertans.

Recall Act

Ms Notley: Now, Mr. Speaker, say what you will about yesterday's recall bill, the litmus test for this Premier's authenticity on this particular election promise is whether or not it will apply to him or his caucus this term. Now, the bill limits recall before an election, which means that no recall campaign can start after June 1, 2022, yet this Premier is giving no assurance that it will be proclaimed in any meaningful time before that. Does the Premier expect Albertans to believe he's serious about anything other than protecting himself from growing dissent among Albertans?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I just need to correct the record of the previous questions. I have here a letter from the then Minister of Energy under the NDP government in 2016 with respect to the Ram River Coal Corporation, indicating the previous government's support for that through the environmental impact assessment act. When they were in government, they pretended to support jobs. Now the mask has fallen, and the NDP has become nothing but a

radical anti resource development party. We always knew that was the case.

Ms Notley: The letter referred to the Loughheed coal policy. These guys cancelled it.

Now, this Premier is hardly the poster boy for grassroots empowerment. Heck, he's gone from signing a grassroots guarantee for his members to robotically repeating that he doesn't care about internal party politics, except he must care because he's working very hard to avoid being recalled by his own party members through a leadership review, one that's now delayed until 2022. Once again, if the Premier truly believes in the power of recall, why won't he ensure that his legislation is in place by June of this year?

Mr. Kenney: Well, isn't this curious, Mr. Speaker? The NDP has always opposed recall. They've always opposed additional measures for democratic accountability. They opposed our law in the last session for referendums on constitutional matters in this province. We have kept, right down to the letter, our election commitment to Albertans, which was to pass a recall law based on the recall law in British Columbia, that was brought in by a previous NDP government. Over in B.C. they're actually pro-democracy, moderate New Democrats, not these autocratic New Democrats here in Alberta. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, I support the truth, and the truth is that he's not going to have it applied to himself.

The truth is that this bill isn't even about MLAs in this Legislature; its intended target seems to be municipal councillors and school board trustees who are speaking out against this Premier. I say that because he's made two sets of rules, one that makes it significantly easier to recall those folks than any member of the UCP caucus. Premier, do you really think Albertans support you protecting your MLAs through this double standard, which is delayed?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, in the last session they called a referendum bill antidemocratic. They said that allowing people to vote on big issues was antidemocratic, and now they're opposing a recall bill that allows MLAs, yes, and other elected people to be recalled in principle because they say that it's against accountability. They live in some kind of a weird, upside-down, Alice-in-Wonderland world. The truth of this bill is that it significantly increases democratic accountability, yes, for all elected officials, MLAs and municipal and school board officials.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition for her third set of questions.

Ms Notley: Yet conveniently their bill does not appear to apply to them in this term.

Canadian Energy Centre Activities

Ms Notley: Perhaps the Premier is clearly focused on bigger priorities like his hunt for Bigfoot and Bigfoot's family. Yes, the Premier has finally solved the mystery of foreign-funded anti-oil activism, and the core conspirators are Netflix and a cartoon sasquatch. Mr. Speaker, the headlines ran world-wide. At a time when we need international investment, your war room has created an international embarrassment again. Tell us exactly which investors in Zurich you think were swayed by your brave stand against a child's cartoon character.

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, as a result of the Canadian Energy Centre challenging this anti oil and gas propaganda designed for children, the largest, most read newspaper in the United Kingdom today published the following headline: Put Their Foot in It: Netflix's the Bigfoot Family Blasted for 'Brainwashing Kids...' with Divisive Bombing Storyline. That is a message of success for Alberta. I know the NDP hates oil and gas. They've always despised this province's largest industry, and I'm sure they're cheering on the propaganda in that Netflix story, but we're correcting the record, as we should.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, more people laughing at you is not a win.

A week ago no one had even heard of *Bigfoot Family*; today it's a top-10 film streaming on Netflix across Canada. Government MLAs in estimates actually tried to claim that more people watching it was a win. Mr. Speaker, over there in UCP land this may be their version of standing up against their new cartoon enemy, but this latest boondoggle has multiplied Bigfoot's audience exponentially. Is the Premier trying to stomp out the message or spread it further? It looks to me like he is really losing this fight.

Mr. Kenney: Let's be blunt, Mr. Speaker. Here's a Hollywood production that depicts an oil company – by the way, oil companies are the largest industry in Alberta, the largest employer, the largest job creator, the largest contributor to our public treasury and our public services – as wanting to murder children to oppose environmental progress. The NDP: that's who they're defending. Here's the bottom line. They've always been against our largest industry. Albertans elected this government to stand up and defend that industry.

Ms Notley: We have always been for protecting the reputation of our energy industry. These guys have been fundamentally undermining that reputation since the day they got elected. This war room has stolen logos. It has posed as a journalist. It's attacked the journalistic integrity of the *New York Times*. Premier, your failed candidate has more than two years of executive compensation under his belt. You've more than paid him off. Why don't you do Albertans a favour and fire him, close the war room, and stop the bleeding from this war room?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 2 o'clock.

2:00

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, this government was elected explicitly on a commitment to create a proactive communications effort to defend in real time the energy industry, that has been defamed by who? The left, by the NDP and their fellow travellers. The NDP's reason for existing in Alberta is to oppose and undermine the largest industry in this province. They've always been wrong, and they were fired partly because they participated in the Trudeau government's efforts to undermine our energy sector. They were wrong; that's why they were fired.

Provincial Park Fees

Mr. Schmidt: Budget 2021 has a mysterious passing reference to \$20 million of new revenue for Environment and Parks from, quote, some new or increased fees, but those weren't outlined in the budget's actual list of new fees. Last night at estimates the environment minister admitted that he is planning to impose a whole new range of fees on Alberta families enjoying our parks. To the minister: how much in day-use fees will he charge Albertans to enjoy a picnic or a hike in a provincial park?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's unfortunate that the NDP continues to want to misframe what's taking place within our provincial parks system. This next two years we're going to spend \$164 million on the operation of that system and \$158 million over the next two years in capital on that system, and about 40 per cent of that is paid for by revenue coming from modest user fees within the parks system. We intend to continue with that type of a ratio going forward. We are committed to subsidizing the parks system in Alberta because it's important to Albertans, but at the same time, we've heard loud and clear from Albertans that they're okay with modest fees as long as it goes back to conservation. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, last night the minister rattled off a few of the other fees, including increased camping fees and new OHV trail fees. Then he added, quote: the Alberta government will continue to look at user fees, including new user fees I haven't identified today. We know about the minister's picnic tax and his hiking tax. Can the minister tell this House and all Albertans what other kinds of fees he's planning to spring on them this year?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, I was clear with the hon. member in estimates that Alberta's government is committed to fully funding our provincial parks system, and part of that funding comes from modest user fees. We spent the last two years consulting with Albertans when it comes to user fees within our parks system and heard overwhelmingly that they were comfortable with modest fees that were invested back within the parks system. Again, Alberta's government will continue to invest over 50 per cent of each time that that member or any Albertan goes camping within our system. At the same time, we'll continue with modest fees just like the NDP did to operate the parks system.

Mr. Schmidt: If he's hearing from Albertans that they want these fees, then just tell them what the fees are that they're going to be paying this year. This is the same minister who led his caucus in song denying that he was planning to sell Alberta's parks just before he announced that he was abandoning his plan to sell Alberta's parks. Albertans don't trust this minister, and a whole range of sneaky new fees and picnic taxes underline that point. Why won't the minister just stand up, take responsibility for his bad choices, and come clean with Albertans about all of the new fees and taxes and levies that he's planning to spring on Alberta's families using our parks?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, the NDP is acting like fees that were within the government platform are somehow a secret. We ran on a commitment to bring in a random-camping fee in the eastern slopes of \$30 a year to camp as many nights as you like, with that revenue dedicated to protecting the environment. We ran on a fee for off-highway vehicles because we wanted to do the opposite of the former government, who wanted to shut down all off-highway vehicles inside this province and ban them from their own backyard. Instead, we came forward with a modest fee of \$30 a year for off-highway vehicle users, with that money going back to our ATV clubs to go into conservation for fish habitat and water crossings. Again, we're committed to conservation and modest fees.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche.

Budget 2021 and Job Creation

Ms Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The pandemic has felt like a long journey through a dark tunnel. Thankfully, we can now

see the light at the end. Alberta's vaccine rollout is under way, and doses are continuing to be administered in a targeted, strategic way to those that need it most. However, we're still in a global pandemic, and the economic crisis is causing reduced revenue and increased costs. To the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation. Albertans want to get back to business. How is Alberta's government investing in job creation for the 2021 fiscal year?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to that member for the question. One example of many that we're doing in this budget is working on diversification in our economy, and that includes film and television. We're on track for a record year in attracting productions here to the province of Alberta. We've increased the film and television tax credit up to \$50 million in this budget. We're going to have a record year in film and television productions here in the province of Alberta. This isn't just about attracting Hollywood stars. This is about carpenters that are building sets. This is about electricians. This is about people that are providing services from small businesses, from community to community. It's one part of our plan to get people back to work.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche.

Ms Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that \$20.7 billion is being invested in infrastructure through Budget 2021, creating an estimated 90,000 new jobs when our province needs it the most, and given that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic Alberta's government has focused on the immediate protection of lives and livelihoods and given that as we continue vaccinations, the focus will shift from the immediate response to a long-term economic recovery, to the minister: what is Alberta's government doing to create sustainable, long-term jobs for Albertans?

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you to that member for that question. There are three foundational pillars to our economic recovery plan: one is taxes – we accelerated the job-creation tax cut here in Alberta – two is efficient government, and the third part of it is talent. We need to make sure we have those three components, Mr. Speaker, to make sure that we have the right overall framework for Alberta. The Conference Board of Canada, RBC, BMO: all are forecasting that Alberta is going to lead the country in growth as well as job creation in the coming year.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for that answer. Given that Budget 2021 is all about making crucial investments and maintaining responsible spending and given that now more than ever Albertans are looking forward to a future beyond the pandemic and given that we need to make smart long-term investments that will put Alberta in the best possible position for economic recovery, to the minister: what is Alberta's government doing to diversify our province's job market and make innovative investments in emerging sectors? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The members opposite are getting a little bit feisty over there today, but you know what? We'll give them a chance to thank Infosys for bringing 500 jobs to Alberta. They've yet to comment positively. On diversification

we're keeping our eye on the ball: the innovation employment grant, the best research and development grant for start-ups in Alberta; Alberta Enterprise Corporation, recapitalizing it with \$175 million. Best year in venture capital: 2019; beaten in 2020; 2021 is off to an even faster start. Diversification is happening here in our province, and we're excited to see it happen.

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

Energy Ministry Budget

Ms Ganley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today in estimates the Minister of Energy refused to provide an explanation for why it was that her government did not book any money related to the money lost on the Keystone XL pipeline. She did admit to Albertans that we're on the hook for at least \$1.3 billion but refused to provide further accounting. Last year the Auditor General had to force them to book it. To the minister: don't you think Albertans deserve a proper accounting of your \$1.3 billion blunder?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In estimates today I did note that we have estimated – estimated – the cost for KXL to be an exposure of \$1.28 billion. That number will be fully accounted for in the annual reports. We continue to work with TC Energy. We continue to work with them to see how to lessen the impact. There'll be a full and transparent accounting of KXL.

Ms Ganley: Given that Albertans deserve to expect an accounting in budget and given that this morning in estimates the Minister of Energy refused to provide an accounting of \$19 million supposedly spent on advocacy in the last fiscal year and given that all I see for this so-called advocacy is an attack on a children's cartoon about Bigfoot, will the minister commit to providing a full accounting today of how her department spent, past tense, \$19 million? We don't see any advocacy, Minister, only embarrassments.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Absolutely, I'll commit to a full accounting, just like standard government practices. Yes, today we were talking about estimates – estimates – of what will be spent next year. What we spent last year will be fully accounted for in public accounts and in the annual report. Yes, absolutely, they'll see every penny of it.

2:10

Ms Ganley: Given that the minister is now asking for \$12 million for the war room and \$15 million for advocacy but is unable to provide any evidence of positive outcomes from last year's money and given that I actually fear, as do many Albertans, that the disgraced war room and the Allan inquiry are harming our reputation, not improving it, Minister, if you were still in the private sector, do you really think your boss would cut you a \$27 million blank cheque when you have no evidence to back up your work?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Having worked in the private sector in the pipeline industry, I know that budgets are allocated for future events, just like our budget is and just like we deal with in estimates. There is money set aside for industry advocacy in the budget for next year. It will be used to support the industry, to support market access, on initiatives as they arise, exactly as it works in the private sector.

The Speaker: The Opposition House Leader has a question.

Teachers' Retirement Fund Management

Ms Gray: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Another month and another lawsuit by Albertans forced to take their own government to court. This time it's teachers, and they're fighting for their pensions. At stake is \$19.3 billion and the retirement security of 84,000 teachers. This Finance minister promised teachers that no matter what happened, they would always retain control over how their pensions were invested, but then he signed a ministerial order and went back on his word. To the Finance minister: when will you show the teachers the respect that they deserve and take your hands off their pension?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would do it except my hands are not on their pension. Right now ATRF continues to manage the ATRF pension, which sets aside funds for teachers' pensions. The changes that we've made in Bill 22 by amalgamating the investment function under AIMCo will serve teachers and Alberta taxpayers well. ATRF will continue to provide high-level oversight over strategic investment policy.

Ms Gray: Given that this Minister of Finance signed a ministerial order on December 23 which unilaterally imposed an investment management agreement that gave AIMCo the final say on investment decisions for ATRF's pension assets and given that it was AIMCo that walked away from the table instead of negotiating as they should have and given that this imposed agreement breaks the minister's promise to teachers, to the minister: what compelled you to go back on your word, give AIMCo that control over the teachers' pension right at the Christmas holidays, with no discussion, dialogue, or communication with those who teach our children?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In December I implemented a temporary investment management agreement between the two parties so that ATRF and AIMCo can continue to move forward to pull assets over and get on with the business of investing those assets in the best interest of Alberta teachers and Alberta taxpayers. This agreement was substantially similar to agreements that have served other pension funds extremely well in the past. I'm hopeful that ATRF and AIMCo will form a new agreement, which will then supersede the one that I implemented.

Ms Gray: Given that AIMCo walked away from the table – one of those two parties stopped negotiating – and you imposed an agreement, I don't understand how you think that the situation will improve. Given that now the Finance minister is wasting time and money defending actions in court as he needlessly grants AIMCo that control over the pensions and given that the Alberta teachers' retirement fund is one of the best run pension plans in the country and given that the government did not campaign on this, to the Finance minister: will you admit that your strategy has been a disaster and just listen to Alberta's teachers when they're begging you to take your hands off their pension?

The Speaker: The Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What I will admit to is that the plan and fundamental motive in bringing ATRF's assets under AIMCo's management continue to be valid today. It will result in lower costs in administering the investment strategies. That will result in better returns for teachers, better returns for Alberta taxpayers. Our goals are congruent, and the methodology is sound.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika.

Recall Act (continued)

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is our duty as representatives of our constituents to be their voice to the provincial government. Although it may be difficult to voice all the unique opinions of our constituents, we still have a duty to work hard and listen to their concerns. But in some cases our constituents feel like their MLA has failed to represent them altogether. To the Minister of Justice: how can Albertans hold their representatives to account?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for that important question. I know that this is a question that is important to my colleague the Member for Cardston-Siksika and his constituents. Recall is a tool Albertans can use to hold their elected representatives accountable by removing them from office. An Albertan who feels this way can collect signatures from other Albertans in their constituency who likewise believe the relationship with their elected official is beyond repair. If they collect enough signatures, they can begin that particular process.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee, of which I was the chair . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Oh, you did a marvellous job.

Mr. Schow: . . . thoroughly reviewed recall legislation with many different representatives, including stakeholders and citizens providing input, and given that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar clearly opposes recall based on his heckling right now and given that the Democratic Accountability Committee gave 17 recommendations based on presentations and written input to Alberta's government about recall legislation, to the minister: how many of these recommendations did the ministry use when drafting this legislation?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me once again thank the member for his work in chairing that important Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee. That committee made 17 recommendations with respect to recall legislation. I can confirm to this House and to this member that all 17 recommendations were adopted, and that bill has been tabled before the floor of this Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for that answer. Given that petitioners in recall legislation would be able to recall their MLA if they were to gather 40 per cent of the eligible voter signatures on a petition and given that outside

organizations could hire petitioners to campaign for the recall of an MLA, which could cause unfair campaigns that are not necessarily for the interest of the citizens but for special interest groups themselves, to the minister: will this legislation prevent paid campaigners from being able to petition for a recall?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a very important question, and I am glad the hon. member has given me this opportunity to comment on such a significant issue. Let me be crystal clear. The question of a recall vote is a discussion between constituents. It is up to the constituents to collect signatures for recall. It is up to the constituents to vote for or against a recall. Recall is not a matter decided by parties and the party machine. Let me also assure the member that there would not be, you know, fees or charges for . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning has a question.

Government Members' and Staff Members' Travel

Ms Sweet: Mr. Speaker, Albertans were rightfully furious this Christmas when news emerged that a UCP cabinet minister, MLAs, and the Premier's chief of staff had decided that the public health rules didn't apply to them, and they jetted off to Hawaii, London, Phoenix, Mexico, and Las Vegas. The CBC issued a freedom of information request for the complaints about this fiasco that were sent directly to the Premier's office. They only got seven records back. To the Premier: are Albertans really supposed to believe that only seven people complained about the Alohatgate fiasco? What are you hiding?

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. When it comes to hiding things, I think the NDP appear to be the king of that inside this Chamber. The Premier was very transparent about the situation that took place over Christmas. In fact, he stood up in a news conference on January 1 of this year and took full responsibility for the situation and then brought forward consequences for the members of our caucus, who have since apologized. I will note that that member still has not risen in this House and apologized for being part of a party that continues to protest against our oil and gas industry. I've got a few other things to say in a moment.

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

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Government House Leader might just want to take some responsibility for what's going on in his side of the House.

Given that we know that the Premier signed off on his chief of staff's vacation to London and required ministers to inform their office of their vacation plans and given that the Premier has changed his stories on the jet-setting Alohatgate fiasco multiple times and given that Albertans don't trust this Premier to tell the truth, Premier, there is not a single Albertan in this province that believes you got only seven calls about this. Will you table all complaints to your office in regard to this scandal?

2:20

The Speaker: I'd just remind the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning that the use of a preamble after question 4 is prohibited.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, the Premier has been abundantly transparent on this issue. Again, the Official Opposition, though,

has not been on many issues, including when the current Leader of the Official Opposition was Premier and had to do an investigation into her own caucus about sexual behaviour, which to this day has been kept quiet from Albertans. I would suggest that if the NDP are worried about transparency, they start with their side of the House.

Ms Sweet: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that this government has shown an aversion to being transparent with Albertans, as evident from their shielding of the failed war room from FOIP, firing the commissioner investigating their leadership election, and now by clearly not honestly reflecting the volume of complaints they received from Albertans about Alohatgate, and given that rather than rebuilding trust with Albertans, the Premier continues to duck accountability and provide nonsensical answers to my questions, I'm not going to ask a third question. Instead, I'll tell Albertans that if they're still upset with this Premier about Alohatgate, all they have to do is send him a note at premier@gov.ab.ca.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. That gives me an opportunity, then, if there's no question, to rise and point out that many leading banks and economists are projecting that Alberta is going to lead the way for recovery inside this country. That is why that hon. member and her party are playing games in this Legislature. They're rooting against Albertans. They're rooting against our success. But, Mr. Speaker, through you to Albertans: don't worry; we're going to lead the way when it comes to recovery after COVID-19.

Municipal Funding and Budget 2021

Member Ceci: This government's fiscal priorities are clear. When it comes to attacking children's cartoons or ensuring that profitable corporations can boost shareholder dividends, there is no expense too high or cost too deep they won't go, but when it comes to our cities and ensuring that they can create jobs, we see this minister planning 25 per cent cuts and claiming there's no way they can fulfill their capital investment priorities. Minister, investing in our cities will create jobs; investing in fighting kids' cartoons won't. Why can't you see this and stop your damaging MSI cuts?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know it's foreign to the hon. member that was once the Finance minister of this province to think about living within one's means, but we just dropped a budget on the table with an \$18 billion deficit. Now, on this side we're not proud of that deficit number, but we are taking action to lower it. The member opposite, that actually should know better after four years of being trained as Finance minister, can't get that through his mind.

Member Ceci: Given that this government broke a promise by cancelling city charters and broke a promise again by delaying the local governance fiscal framework until after 2023 but given that while this minister can't create jobs, they can waste tax dollars on things like the embarrassing war room, the failed corporate handout, and more, Minister, if you were more focused on jobs for Albertans and less on wasting money on UCP pet projects, our cities wouldn't face a 25 per cent cut. Why do the residents of Alberta's cities have to suffer from your government's wrong-headed decisions?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite may think that a government can tax their way to success or cut their way to success, but we know we need to build the economy, build the economic pie in order to share it with people. Has the member heard that Alberta will lead the nation this year in economic growth? Alberta will lead the nation this year in job growth. That's what municipalities and the people that live in them are concerned about. It's what we're concerned about. We're in tune with Albertans, and we are making the tough decisions along the way.

Member Ceci: Given that this minister is, absurdly, demanding that cities need to live within their own means when his government has wasted billions on a no-job corporate handout, a bet on Donald Trump winning the White House, and this shameful, embarrassing war room and given that the UCP itself wasn't able to live within its own means as a political party, who took Justin Trudeau's handout to pay for their political operatives, Minister, shouldn't you start by living within your own means? Why won't you stop wasting money on failed economic strategy approaches that are about as unpopular as the Premier?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is the type of hypocrisy and inconsistency we expect from the other side. He started off with a spending question. He ended with a saving question. When he decides which side he's on, he should let us know. In the meantime we'll keep working on expanding the fact that Alberta will lead the economy this year; Alberta will lead the job growth this year across Canada. Those are real results for Albertans. That's what they've been waiting for. That's what we're working hard to deliver.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie has a question.

Technology Industry and Economic Diversification

Mr. Milliken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we work hard to recover from the global pandemic and economic downturn, our government is investing to diversify our economy. Given that our supports have led to new investments in technology and innovation, including at postsecondary institutions such as the U of C and their UCEED funding program, to the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation: can you explain how our government's support of investments in technology will affect economic stability and how it will contribute to accelerating innovation in our province?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for that question. Last summer we struck the Innovation Capital Working Group to give us advice on how we could accelerate diversification, particularly in those fast-growing venture capital start-up companies. They gave us two really key parts of that for advice. One, put in place the innovation employment grant. We got that done; started January 1 of this year. The second part of it: recapitalize Alberta Enterprise Corporation with an additional \$175 million. Our budget does that right now. We've seen record growth in venture capital. That member is from Calgary, my hometown as well. A record in 2019, destroyed that record in 2020, and 2021 is off to an even faster start in venture capital.

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

Mr. Milliken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the drop in oil and gas demand coupled with the current economic situation caused by the pandemic has brought the unemployment rate up in Alberta

and given that new technology companies such as mCloud and Infosys are moving to Alberta, creating more jobs and bringing new investment, to the same minister: can you please inform this House on how diversifying our economy will have a positive effect on job creation and get Albertans back to work?

The Speaker: The Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have an amazing foundation – energy, ag, forestry – to build on. It's amazing to see a critical mass now also coming in the technology space in Alberta. For example, in the city of Calgary they just attracted mCloud, a company that was headquartered in Vancouver, moving their head office to Calgary, hiring an additional hundred Albertans. We've got Infosys, an international technology company, moving 500 jobs to Calgary. And we've seen fast-growing companies, from Benevity to Symend, Neo Financial. These are cutting-edge companies that are scaling, going from 20 to 50 employees just a year ago to over 250 employees now, to a trajectory to 500-plus employees soon.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Milliken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that in my own riding of Calgary-Currie I know many businesses who have struggled over the course of the last year, whether that's laying off employees, some of whom are my friends and neighbours, and given that diversifying our economy will benefit investment in our province and help drive increased growth, jobs, and opportunities, to the Minister of Finance: how will investing in a diversified economy affect Alberta's revenue and help us deal with the debtor deficit?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. Increased economic diversification and growth is critical to Alberta's economic recovery, but it's also critical to our long-term fiscal capacity, which will result in increased revenues for the government of Alberta, which, of course, are used to pay for our programming. Here's the good news. I don't know if we've mentioned this yet today. The National Bank, the BMO, and the Conference Board of Canada are all expecting Alberta to lead the nation in economic growth in 2021. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

Bill 57

Mr. Nielsen: Mr. Speaker, the UCP are claiming that the proposed amendments to the Metis Settlements Act is removing red tape, but General Council President Herb Lehr said that this bill will take away their right to democratically decide how they want to be governed. He also said that this was done without consultation. To the Minister of Indigenous Relations: please explain how removing democratic agency from Métis people in Alberta without consultation is removing red tape.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am proud of our Minister of Indigenous Relations for his hard work in bringing reform to the Metis Settlements Act in a set of amendments that will give control of the future of their settlements back to the people. That is what

we expect from our government. That's what the people expect. That will enhance the prosperity of our brothers and sisters within the Métis settlements.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

2:30

Mr. Nielsen: Reform without consultation.

Given that the changes done to the Metis Settlements Act should be done in consultation with the Métis but Herb Lehr said that the amendments that the Metis Settlements General Council wanted are not included in Bill 57 and changes they disagreed with were done without consultation, Minister, it appears that you consider genuine consultation and conversation with Métis and indigenous people to be red tape. This is wrong and insulting. Will you reverse these undemocratic plans and commit to meeting with Metis Settlements General Council to make changes to the act that actually work for them?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me assure this Assembly that the Métis general council was consulted on this particular bill. You know, what is required is that we consult with them and we listen to them. You know, I remember the president, that the member opposite referred to, telling me when I was Minister of Municipal Affairs that my visit to Elizabeth and Fishing Lake was the first time a minister of the Crown had visited those settlements. Once again, what we have done here is give control of the settlement back to the people of the settlement. [interjection]

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. member.

Mr. Nielsen: The president disagrees.

Given that I often disagree with what this government claims as red tape but I still fundamentally believe that government should be consistently reviewed and reformed to work better for Albertans; however, given that consultation with the Métis and indigenous people is paramount to genuine reconciliation, these conversations should never be considered red tape, to the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction: will you apologize to the Métis people of Alberta about this insulting framing, and will you commit to pulling this horrendous bill until you sit down and hold genuine consultation with the Métis people?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the key provisions of the amendment that was put forward by the Minister of Indigenous Relations is actually giving control of the settlement, their funds and their future, back to their people, instead of the government and the Minister of Indigenous Relations having to make those decisions for them. That is exactly what they asked for. That is exactly what they expect of their government. That's exactly what we have done. We are giving control of their funds and resources back to them.

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

Northeast Calgary Concerns

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It has been 275 days since the hailstorm hit northeast Calgary, the fourth-largest natural disaster in Canadian history. This government continues to refuse to act despite repeated requests for assistance from northeast Calgary. I

have heard from families that are still waiting on repairs who also have seen their heating bills go up this winter because of the holes in their homes. To the Minister of Finance: why did you leave my constituents to freeze this winter? Why did you fail to ensure that every single home was repaired before the temperature dropped?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We know that the hailstorm in Calgary created hardship, and I also know that many Calgary MLAs worked with their constituents and their constituents' insurance companies to work through that process and find the remedy that they needed. We're committed to continue to ensure that insurance companies deliver on their promises to Albertans with respect to providing insurance indemnities where there's been loss.

Mr. Sabir: Given that as of the end of November only 60 per cent of 70,000 hail damage claims had been processed, meaning tens of thousands are still waiting for this government to act, and given that on top of COVID this is creating additional stresses and anxiety for my community and constituency, to the minister. Your government promised help. Why wouldn't you deliver?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Calgary hailstorm was a massive hailstorm in a densely populated region, and insurance companies are working through those claims. Again, Calgary MLAs are working with their constituents to work through that process. I'm hopeful that in the weeks ahead all the claims can be adjudicated and Calgary residents that have experienced loss can actually be repaid.

Mr. Sabir: Given that many of my constituents are on the front lines of the pandemic and given that the Premier has yet to apologize for blaming them for spreading COVID-19 and given that many are also shocked to learn that they don't qualify for the critical worker benefit, such as cab drivers, to the minister: why is it that this government continues to insult, ignore, and fail northeast Calgary?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would have the hon. member and all Albertans know that our government has worked with community leaders in Calgary and across Edmonton, and we are working with them to create COVID care teams all across the cities, where we've actually gone right to the homes through the community associations that the people already belong to, in the language that they speak, even if it's not English or French, to make sure that they get all the care during COVID. They get access to personal protective equipment, and they get access to what everybody else gets. We're working very hard on doing this.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche.

COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout

Ms Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If you were to listen to the members opposite, you might think that Alberta's vaccine rollout wasn't happening quick enough. However, just last week my dad booked his appointment and got vaccinated the very same day, and that was just blocks away from his house in Fort McMurray. Alberta's government made a clear plan to administer vaccines as

quickly and safely as possible, and we're following through on this. To the Minister of Health: can you please explain and provide an update on the progress of Alberta's vaccine rollout?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. With the vaccine supply finally increasing, we can continue to expand the rollout. If and only if supply continues to increase, we expect to offer all Albertans who are 18 and over their first dose by the end of June. To date about 380,000 doses have been administered in the province. In the last seven days we've averaged more than 8,800 vaccinations a day, or about 66,000 in the week, and as more doses arrive, we'll continue expanding eligibility to give out 200,000 doses per week.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche.

Ms Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister. At the start of the year Alberta's government created a vaccine task force to ensure a ready-to-go vaccine rollout. Given that Alberta has been among the top provinces for administering received doses and given that while we've made significant progress in the fight against COVID-19, there are still Albertans waiting for their vaccines, to the Minister of Health: can you please explain why vaccinations have taken longer than expected and how Alberta is doing in comparison to the rest of Canada?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our vaccination teams are working extremely hard to get doses into the arms of Albertans as quickly as they arrive in the province, and we've committed to offering everyone 18 or older their first dose by the end of June. Alberta is ahead of most provinces: B.C., Ontario, Quebec. They have only started immunizing older seniors while we're offering the vaccine to everyone who's 65 and older. Now, Alberta has administered more doses per capita than B.C., Manitoba, Newfoundland, and Nova Scotia. This morning we've announced as well that family physicians will be administering doses in April.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for that answer. Given that if we get the supply promised by the federal government, all Albertans over 18 could have their first dose by the end of June and given that while the federal government continues to promise that vaccines and more vaccines will be coming, Canada continues to fall behind in administered doses and given that right now provincial governments are at the mercy of the federal vaccine supply, to the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation: do we have any contingency plans in place in case the federal government's promise falls through?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've asked for proposals for domestic development as well as manufacturing of vaccines right here in Alberta. We have two vaccines that are in human trials, Entos and Providence. It's encouraging to see that they're at the forefront of research as well at the University of Alberta. We have a Nobel Prize winner there, Dr. Houghton. We are seeking those proposals, and we're taking a look at this from a bigger picture, a longer term approach as well. We invest in food

security and national security; health security is equally as important, as this pandemic has shown.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Visitor Economy Promotion

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Calgary's hotel sector has suffered job losses of 2,800 of its 3,900 prepandemic employee base, with a devastating \$145 million revenue reduction to just \$35 million. Hotels across the province are facing similar challenges, and the industry faces a crisis unlike any we have ever seen. Given our government's focus on protecting lives and livelihoods and given that many Albertans are facing the formidable challenge to our incredible world-class visitor economy, to the Minister of Health: how is Alberta supporting facilities and operators so that they'll be ready to safely and rapidly relaunch?

2:40

Mr. Schweitzer: Mr. Speaker, we're going to make sure that we're there to help support our hotel industry across Alberta. We know that they've been drastically impacted by the travel restrictions that have been put in place. Our tourism industry is reliant on flights coming into Alberta. We're not necessarily a destination that people drive to all the time, other than maybe some neighbouring provinces. We need to have those flights that are in place.

We've been there with supports. We provided \$8 million to destination management organizations across Alberta. We've had the tourism levy abatement in place. We put the relaunch grant in place, Mr. Speaker, with \$575 million in support as well as the enhanced COVID-19 business benefit to support our tourism and the hotel sector.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you to the minister. Mr. Speaker, given that provincially driven rapid testing pilot program at Calgary International Airport was deemed successful by travellers, airlines, and airport management, noting its suspension on February 11 due to federally mandated restrictions around COVID-19 variants, and given that the National Airlines Council of Canada is urging the federal government to implement rapid testing at all airports given the critical importance of relaunch of our national visitor economy, again to the minister: will Alberta consider revisiting the rapid testing pilot program, when able, for YYC and other airports across our great province?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our rapid testing pilot program was successful. It was a made-in-Alberta solution. The pilot helped more than 50,000 travellers to undergo testing, and then, if they proved negative, to safely leave quarantine. It also proved an essential tool to help screen for variant cases in returning international travellers.

The pilot was suspended by the federal government in February due to those federal restrictions. The pilot program will no longer be available until at least the federal government eases those travel restrictions on April 30, and we'll re-evaluate whether the restart at the end of April can proceed.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the relaunch of our visitor economy will be driven largely by air capacity and given that said capacity has been largely restricted due to the pandemic with devastating impact on our airports, airlines, and tourism operators, what is our government planning in support of relaunch

efforts of these vital lengths to jump-start our treasured and battered visitor economy?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Jobs, the Economy and Innovation.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for his leadership with our Aviation Council and getting that in place and his continued engagement in making sure that Alberta has the fastest bounce back possible to get our airline industry up and running here in the province of Alberta. I just want to commend him for his efforts on that front.

We're going to continue to be there, Mr. Speaker. We're going to work with Travel Alberta. We've expanded their budget by \$22 million, assuming it passes through this House; I don't want to preempt that. That will help Travel Alberta work with the tourism industry, make sure that we have flights coming into our province, make sure that that experience in Alberta is one that everybody wants to write home about and tell their neighbours about so everybody can come to Alberta and experience our amazing way.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the time allotted for Oral Question Period. In 30 seconds or less we will proceed to the Introduction of Bills.

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General.

Bill 51 Citizen Initiative Act

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with great pleasure that I request leave of this Assembly to move first reading of Bill 51, the Citizen Initiative Act.

Under Bill 51 an Albertan could, through Elections Alberta, petition other Albertans on proposed legislative policy or constitutional initiatives that they would like their government to explore. Successful legislative or policy initiatives would then be referred to a committee of the Legislative Assembly for consideration. Successful constitutional initiatives would proceed through the process established in the Referendum Act.

I hope, Mr. Speaker, that members on both sides of the House would support this important piece of legislation. With that, I move first reading of Bill 51.

[Motion carried; Bill 51 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise with the requisite number of copies, tablings of e-mails that we have been able to access through FOIP in regard to e-mails that the Premier received in relation to Aloahgate.

The Speaker: The hon. the Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the appropriate number of letters that the hon. the Premier referred to in question period. I have a letter from the former Energy minister in which she instructs the AER to allow mining on category 2 lands, including strip mining, inside the province of Alberta.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wanted to rise to table the requisite number of copies on behalf of the Minister of Service Alberta of three pieces of correspondence received by his office and quoted by him in his comments yesterday during second reading of Bill 53. Each of these e-mails is from an Albertan looking for the ability to hold virtual meetings.

The Speaker: Are there others? Hon. members, I have a tabling to make pursuant to section 28 of the Conflicts of Interest Act. I am tabling six copies of a report from the office of the Ethics Commissioner.

Hon. members, we are at points of order. At 2 o'clock the Government House Leader raised a point of order, which he subsequently has withdrawn.

Hon. members, as we prepare for Committee of Supply, we will just take a couple of brief moments to allow some officials to get set into their spots in the Assembly, and we will proceed with the Committee of Supply when ready to do so.

Orders of the Day

Committee of Supply

[Mrs. Pitt in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, I would like to call Committee of Supply to order.

Hon. members, before we commence consideration of supplementary supply, I would like to briefly review the standing orders governing the speaking rotation. As provided for in Standing Order 59.02, the rotation in Standing Order 59.01(6) applies, which is as follows:

- (a) the Minister, or the member of the Executive Council acting on the Minister's behalf, may make opening comments not to exceed 10 minutes
- (b) for the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the Minister, or the member of the Executive Council acting on the Minister's behalf, may speak . . .
- (d.1) for the next 20 minutes, the members of any other party represented in the Assembly or any independent Members and the Minister, or the member of the Executive Council acting on the Minister's behalf, may speak
- (e) for the next 20 minutes, private members of the Government caucus and the Minister or the member of the Executive Council acting on the Minister's behalf, may speak, and
- (f) for the time remaining, to the extent possible, the rotation outlined in clauses (b) to (e) shall apply with the speaking times set at 5 minutes as provided in Standing Order 59.02(1)(c).

During the first rotation speaking times are limited to 10 minutes. Once the first rotation is complete, speaking times are reduced to five minutes. Provided that the chair has been notified, a minister and a member may combine their speaking times while both taking and yielding the floor during their combined period. As provided for in Government Motion 68, approved by the Assembly on March 11, 2021, the time allotted for the consideration is three hours.

2:50

Finally, pursuant to Standing Order 61(2.1) if at 5:55 p.m. there are fewer than 15 minutes remaining in the time allotted for consideration of the supplementary estimates, the committee shall continue beyond 6 p.m. to fulfill the time allotted for consideration of the estimates. However, pursuant to Standing Order 61(2.2) if the committee does not fulfill the time allotted for consideration of

the estimates by 6:15 p.m., the committee shall rise and report without the question put.

Hon. members, the Committee of Supply has under consideration the 2020-21 supplementary supply estimates, No. 2. I will now recognize the hon. President of Treasury Board and the Minister of Finance to move estimates.

Supplementary Supply Estimates 2020-21, No. 2 General Revenue Fund

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I would like to move the 2020-2021 supplementary supply estimates, No. 2, for the general revenue fund. When passed, these estimates will authorize an approximate increase of \$1.3 billion in voted expense funding and \$750,000 in voted capital investment. These estimates report the funding needed for the government's fiscal plans as presented in the fiscal update included in Budget 2021.

The estimates include additional funding to the following seven departments: Children's Services; Culture, Multiculturalism and the Status of Women; Education; Energy; Health; Jobs, Economy and Innovation; and Labour and Immigration. Total supplementary funding is approximately \$1.3 billion, and the primary reason for this funding is to carry on with the fight against COVID-19 and to support Alberta's recovery plan.

Madam Chair, at the beginning of last year early economic indicators were showing that 2020 was going to be a turnaround year for Alberta's economy, yet almost at the same time that I stood here and delivered Budget 2020, Alberta was hit by what I have come to call a triple black swan event. This includes the greatest global economic recession since the Great Depression; it includes an unprecedented drop in energy prices; and, at the same time, we were also called on to fight a pandemic within our own borders. These three things have combined to hit Alberta and our resource-based economy harder than most other jurisdictions. Alberta's revenue has seen a steep decrease while, as a necessity, expenses have risen to combat the pandemic and its effects. No one could have predicted the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic would have had on our economy. Alberta needed a bold plan, a plan to jump-start our economy and position Alberta on a path to recovery. That's why our government launched Alberta's recovery plan.

Madam Chair, the funding in these estimates will help our government achieve two main priorities of our recovery plan, protecting the health of Albertans by responding to COVID-19 and taking action to protect people's jobs. You will see in the estimates that the largest supplementary amount belongs to Jobs, Economy and Innovation. Three hundred and seventy-three million dollars will support the small and medium-sized businesses enterprise relaunch grant. The small and medium enterprise relaunch grant offers financial assistance to Alberta businesses, co-operatives, and nonprofits that were ordered to close or curtail operations and that experienced a revenue reduction of at least 30 per cent as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This funding will help small businesses, which are the backbone of our economy and a key source of employment, survive the pandemic. I know that all the hon. members here will agree that this is very important.

Also under Jobs, Economy and Innovation the government provided an additional \$8 million in 2020-2021 to destination marketing organizations in Calgary, Edmonton, Banff, Jasper, and Canmore. The tourism industry has been hit especially hard by the pandemic, but supports like this will position it for recovery.

The next largest expense comes from the Department of Health. Approximately \$323 million will help cover increasing costs for testing, contact tracing, incremental staffing, and overtime. This funding will also help protect staff and clients in supportive living,

addiction and mental health facilities as well as those in the home-care system. Of course, this funding is also earmarked for vaccine distribution, which is the most important thing for protecting the health and jobs of Albertans and getting back to normal.

The supplementary funding for Health will also be used to provide the critical worker benefit, and you will see that Children's Services, Education, and Labour and Immigration also have amounts for this wage benefit. The critical worker benefit will provide a one-time payment of \$1,200 to eligible Albertans in recognition of their hard work to provide Albertans with the care and critical services they need. It will be distributed to up to 380,000 workers in the health care, social service, education, and private sectors.

Alberta's government is working directly with employers to distribute the benefit to eligible workers. While child care workers are among those receiving wage top-ups, the estimates also include almost \$23 million in child care subsidies and supports. Roughly half of this amount will go towards child care rebates for parents, with the other half going towards grants for providers.

As a further boost for workers and jobs supplementary estimates also includes \$62 million for the Alberta jobs now program. This program, which will be formally announced very soon, will ensure that Albertans have the skills they need to get back to work. It will also encourage employers to create jobs, thereby stimulating broader economic recovery. Employers will be able to apply for funding to cover the costs of hiring and training new employees. This initiative will increase employment and skills development opportunities while also aligning the labour market with employer needs.

These estimates also include a supplementary amount of \$12 million for the sport and cultural event relaunch program, the name of which has been recently changed to the stabilize program. As part of Alberta's recovery plan this program provides one-time funding to support rodeos, sports, arts, and other venue-based organizations. It will enable organizations to maintain their operations and support the live-experience sector in Alberta.

The last point I'd like to make is that the estimates also include a supplementary amount of just under \$275 million for crude-by-rail contractual obligations. As a result of the pandemic and ongoing oil price weakness the credit ratings of potential partners decreased, making it extremely difficult to divest these contracts. The Alberta government will continue to work with partners to enable market access while ensuring that Albertans do not shoulder the significant risks of buying and transporting oil.

Overall, the amounts in these supplementary estimates are needed to protect the health and jobs of Albertans, but the government has not lost its focus on long-term fiscal prudence and responsibility. As highlighted in Budget 2021, we remain committed to keeping Alberta's net debt-to-GDP ratio below 30 per cent, bringing our spending in line with that of comparative provinces, ensuring that we deliver government services most efficiently, and developing a plan for balancing the budget once the pandemic is beaten.

Madam Chair, my colleagues and I will now be pleased to answer questions from the members of the Assembly about the 2020-2021 supplementary estimates, No. 2. Thank you.

The Chair: Hon. members, we will now start with members of the Official Opposition. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview. Would you like to take a first 10-minute increment, and would you like to share time with the minister?

Mr. Bilous: I prefer to share time. Thank you very much, Minister.

The Chair: Would you like to take a 10-minute increment or share the whole time?

Mr. Bilous: Share the whole time, please.

The Chair: Okay. All right. Please proceed.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much. I want to thank members for being here today for our second sup supply bill that this government is bringing forward. Just an interesting note for Albertans at home: sup supply is money the government needs in order to continue to deliver programs and services before the 2021 budget, which is being debated right now, passes, should it pass, yet this is the second sup supply bill that this government is bringing forward.

3:00

Now, I do recognize the fact that we are facing a global pandemic, which is having catastrophic consequences and implications for businesses, families, communities right across our province, but I do find it curious and interesting that for a party that runs away from deficits like it was the plague, the current government is running the largest deficit in Alberta's history and actually for four years, while we were in government, campaigned on "how could we possibly be running deficits?" when we had the global collapse in the price of oil.

Now, having said that, I do have a number of questions. The first one. Minister, you're asking for a nontrivial amount of money in this sup supply bill. It is significant. We know that Alberta is facing significant fiscal challenges. Now, my question to the minister is: why is the minister coming to the Assembly to ask for additional debt-financing funds before cutting ineffective, inefficient, counterproductive spending like the war room?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to respond, certainly, to the question and also to a couple of other assertions within the question. Firstly, with respect to defending Alberta's largest industry, in fact Canada's largest industry, and the integrity of that industry, that is a vitally important effort for all Albertans, including the Alberta government. It's an effort that the members opposite, when they were governing, simply didn't rise to the occasion for. As a result of that, we experienced disproportionate attacks on, again, Alberta's largest industry, the most responsible energy industry in the world. That's why we make no apologies for funding the Canadian Energy Centre, that will provide information and facts to Canadians and, in fact, beyond our nation around the environmentally responsible energy industry that we have in this province and the great contribution that that industry provides not only to Albertans but to the nation as a whole.

Madam Chair, I want to talk a wee bit about deficits because, as the member appropriately pointed out and accurately pointed out, we are a government that does not want to run a deficit. We are a government that believes in a balanced budget. We are a government that believes that we should not leave excessive spending for the next generation to deal with, and that's why we brought forward a fiscal plan in Budget 2019 which was a credible plan to balance in our first term, as we committed to Albertans during the election campaign. COVID-19, unfortunately, has gotten in the way of that very credible plan and path to balance, and we've necessarily had to temporarily increase spending. At the same time, we've observed significant reductions in revenues, again because of the pandemic, because of the largest contraction in the global economy since the Great Depression, and because of an unprecedented collapse in global energy prices.

But in the meantime we've identified fiscal anchors, fiscal anchors that will inform our fiscal decisions during this time and until we can define a new path and timeline to balance. Madam Chair, of those fiscal anchors, the first fiscal anchor is that we will keep our net debt-to-GDP ratio below 30 per cent. This is a measure that has a strong correlation for a jurisdiction or entity's ability to service its debt in the future. By ensuring our net debt-to-GDP ratio remains below 30 per cent, that will ensure that Alberta keeps a relatively strong balance sheet even through this pandemic, which will position this province for fiscal recovery.

Fiscal anchor number 2: we will ensure that we will bring our per capita spending in line with that of comparator provinces. Madam Chair, we are committed to deliver government services at least as efficiently as comparator provinces. Our fiscal plan in Budget 2021 accomplishes that, and that's in spite of inheriting a government with a spending trajectory that was increasing 4 per cent per year while revenues were remaining flat.

Madam Chair, our last fiscal anchor is that when we emerge from the pandemic, when we have additional economic clarity, we commit to Albertans that we will provide a fresh path and timeline to get to balance, because getting to balance – balancing the budget, not spending beyond our means – is critically important to this government and, I believe, to Albertans.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Minister, as far as support for the oil and gas sector, we all agree that we need to support Alberta's largest industry. I mean, there were a number of initiatives that we brought in under our government. We don't need to debate that.

My point is only that the war room is not building confidence in Alberta's energy sector. It's, in fact, doing the opposite, which is cause for major concern. I think the Minister of Energy has also heard from a number of her stakeholders directly on how the war room is not helping to improve the reputation of Alberta around the globe; it's doing the opposite. But that's a difference of opinions, Minister, for sure.

Regarding the deficit, I'll make one more comment, and then I'll jump into a specific line item. I appreciate that the minister, through you, Madam Chair, says that he's opposed to deficits, but I will remind the House that in 2019, pre-COVID, this UCP government ran a \$12 billion deficit, higher than any NDP deficit in our four years of government. We'll let the facts stand for themselves.

Now, moving on in this, we're going to start with Jobs, Economy and Innovation. In this sup supply bill the minister is asking for \$370 million for Alberta's small businesses. Now, the minister hailed the relaunch grant, but small businesses are telling us that it's not enough. These businesses really don't know if they're actually going to make it to the other side of this pandemic as none of us know where that is, when we will actually make it to the other side of the pandemic. Many are in dire straits. The government had up to \$7.5 billion to make a bet on Mr. Trump winning the U.S. presidential election but, comparatively, a fraction of that for Alberta businesses.

Now, questions that I have are around the relaunch grant. I appreciate that the minister and I had exchanges in estimates, but I'm looking for a breakdown of this \$375 million. Then I also want to ask the minister this. This sup supply bill is to get government through to March 31, so I think Albertans deserve to know, if part of this line item has already been spent, if it's already been allocated, how much has been allocated and how much this government can get out the door in two weeks to businesses. What is the plan to ensure that this money gets into the hands of businesses?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Madam Chair. At a high level, just to kind of give some context to this, after the first wave of the pandemic, we put in place the relaunch grant, and we budgeted about \$200 million for the initial relaunch grant, which provided supports of up to \$5,000 to small businesses. As we got into the second wave, we recognized that we had to put in place significant health measures that were going to impact small businesses across Alberta, so we increased the relaunch grant up to \$20,000 of support. We also changed the eligibility criteria to bring it down to 30 per cent of revenue losses to be eligible.

We also then at that point in time – and this is the part that really just blows me away on the amazing resiliency of Albertans – had numerous companies start during the pandemic. They decided to hang their shingle out there, start their business during the pandemic, so we had to change the parameters as well for eligibility for those new businesses in Alberta. We also heard from sole proprietors, that didn't have registered businesses, as well that we had to expand the capacity.

Initially, in the first step, we increased the budget to \$500 million. But with those additional measures to make sure that we protected small businesses and make sure that they were eligible for the program, we increased the budget to \$575 million of support. Now, that was what we budgeted in there.

As far as what it is to date, this program – again, people can apply all the way through to the end of March – is still a real program out there eligible for Albertans. As of March 12, 63,158 grants have been made, and these are to organizations that employ over 260,000 Albertans. The total amount that has been issued to date is \$438,866,261.85. That's as of March 12. We're going to continue to process those applications as they come in to make sure that we can continue to get that support out there.

3:10

The average turnaround time from application to money going out the door is about 10 days' time. I do give credit to the department for the efficiency of their program. When you contrast that with other programs that were launched in British Columbia and other jurisdictions, I would put the efficiency of this program's supports going out the door dollar for dollar, efficiency-wise, against any program in the country. It really is a credit to the team behind the scenes that got that job done as well as with support from Service Alberta. Service Alberta built that back-end support to make sure that the program, the online intake system, was efficient. It's a credit to them.

As far as going forward, you mentioned, you know: what are the ongoing supports going to look like? We developed the enhanced COVID-19 business benefit. This is the program that's going to start in April. Again, that's not a part of this initiative here today, what we're dealing with. We had the benefit of thousands upon thousands of applications. We looked at the data, who is going to be the most severely impacted as well as at our four-stage reopening plan. I know people in this room know that we're in step 2 right now. Hopefully, we can get to step 3 here soon.

We knew those businesses that were in step 4. When you're thinking about the hospitality sector, when you're thinking about the event industry, when you're thinking about the people that are impacted the most, we wanted to make sure that we had additional support for them, so we brought in place the enhanced COVID-19 business benefit, with up to an additional \$10,000 for them. But, again, that's for April, so that's beyond the scope of what we're talking about here today.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Minister, for those responses. I appreciate it. I will as well offer my thanks and congratulations to your department staff. A 10-day turnaround is commendable, and on behalf of businesses I know that they appreciate that.

Minister, I might have missed the number, and I apologize. I know you just said it. You talked about the \$438 million, but I'm curious about the \$373 million. Should the Assembly pass that dollar amount today in sup supply, how much of that has been committed, or is that the overall forecast to cover until March 31? Or are you doing a bit of projecting?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Schweitzer: Yeah. To that point, the \$575 million that we budgeted overall for the program until the end of March: that includes submissions that are happening today. That includes kind of a forecast out. The number that I quoted to you, the \$438 million and change: that amount relates to the amounts that have actually been distributed. There's a 10-day lag from when applications go in historically to money going out the door. The money that we quoted to you is the funds that have actually gone out. Right now, you know, the cheques that are being distributed would be from early March. We're going to continue to process those as they come in and make sure that we account for it. We have estimated \$575 million for the whole program. We want to make sure that we have that budget room to get those funds out the door.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Minister, for that clarification. I appreciate it.

I'm curious to know – and I don't know, through you, Madam Chair, to the minister, if he'll have this stat available. I'm just curious to know if the minister has the total number of businesses that did qualify for that allotment and if the minister has access to the number of businesses that did not qualify. I'm curious. I've been asked this by a number of businesses, not only to look at how many qualified but, you know, at how many were unsuccessful in attaining this support.

Mr. Schweitzer: As far as the grants that have been issued to date, 63,158 grants have gone out to, you know, organizations, small and medium enterprises that qualified for supports. Again, that number is 63,158 small and medium enterprises from across Alberta. That does include some not-for-profits as well. They're eligible for the program, as you're aware, for the eligibility criteria. We want to make sure that that work continued there.

I don't have the full number of applications, but we can always follow up. If you have further submissions afterwards, we can always follow up and get you those details as well.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Minister. That's great. I appreciate the offer. I really do. We'll see if there are other questions in the duration of the sup supply estimates that will look for a follow-up from your ministry to the House. That is one that we would appreciate receiving.

Minister, do you have a breakdown by sector? Again, this may be going a little into the weeds but, you know, industry has been asking for a bit of an idea on if you can paint the picture of how many companies would fit into oil and gas, how many in our agricultural space. I don't even know if you have the number, Minister, on sole proprietors, but whatever breakdown you can share, please.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Schweitzer: Yeah. This will hopefully provide a little bit of context, and we can again follow up and I can dig a little bit to see what other information could be available on this front. When we were taking a look at classifying supports, other jurisdictions base some support for industry depending on whether or not they're in the tourism industry or different sectors. We explored some of those options, saying: okay; should we go down this path? The problem is that the tourism sector is broad, as you know. It's small businesses from restaurants to hotels to dogsleds. A whole bunch of different things can fall into the tourism industry, so when we designed our supports, we took a look more at the holistic parameters of revenue loss, so that's why the relaunch grant is a 30 per cent revenue decline.

When we designed the enhanced COVID-19 business benefit, it was based off more impacted revenue declines as well as how much support you were receiving from federal and provincial programs for the enhanced COVID-19 business benefit. We took a look at that in kind of more of a broader stroke to make sure that we didn't miss businesses that were impacted by the pandemic. We didn't want to try to come up with rough parameters and then eliminate a company that should have properly qualified for support just based off broad definitions. As you include or not include a particular definition, that's where the lawyers get involved, and you get into arguments as to whether a company should or should not be in it. We didn't break it down that way. We did break it down broadly.

Again, I'm happy to search with our department, do some follow-up if you'd like further breakdowns of the impacted companies. I will identify in particular, though, that we are aware that the tourism industry in particular – it depends how you define the tourism industry, but we know that they've been impacted dramatically in our province during this pandemic.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister. Absolutely, I appreciate the fact that your approach was looking at how you can help all companies regardless of sector to make it as broad as possible. I mean, the interesting thing or challenge is that we've been hearing, I've been hearing directly from the tourism industry, "We're hit harder than anybody else; we should have additional supports" or "Why aren't there sector-specific supports?" Now, I appreciate what you just said, that one of the challenges is: how do you define the tourism sector? Where does it start and where does it end?

I know that I was talking with business owners of live venues last week who have been shut for 10 out of the 12 months. One of their concerns was accessing the new tranche of money. I appreciate that that starts April 1 – that's in the new budget, not sup supply – but because they've been accessing every dollar the government has made available, because they've been shut in for 10 out of 12 months, they're concerned that they're not going to be able to access the new additional supports. Again, they've survived this long in the pandemic. We know that we see a light at the end of the tunnel. We need these businesses to survive. I mean, these are the backbone of our province.

I guess the question – and I will move into tourism because that is very, very critical funding. We'll talk about the \$8 million in a moment. But, you know, was there a sector analysis done? I know that you know this, Minister, that the tourism sector was hit the hardest. Is there any discussion around additional supports for those that are struggling, that may need additional support above and beyond businesses not within that broad scope?

Mr. Schweitzer: Again, some of this is within my department; some of it is outside of my department. We did put in place the tourism levy abatement as well, which is about \$34 million of support to industry. We put the \$8 million in the destination management organizations from across Alberta to support the tourism industry. Again, this is a bit beyond the scope of what we're talking about here today, but in addition to that, we've put another \$22 million into the Travel Alberta budget for the upcoming fiscal year. The strategy behind that is that we want to have bounce back in the tourism industry as fast as possible. We know that they're reliant on flights coming into Alberta, they're reliant on events, they're reliant on making sure we can get that done, so we really want to make sure that as we go forward, we have that bounce back as fast as possible.

In this budget as well, in this current fiscal year, we had the tourism levy abatement. We had many deferrals as well early on in the pandemic. There were the rent supports before we had clarity as well from the new federal program. There are federal supports for rent, federal supports for wages as well. When we took a look at future supports – that's why we took into consideration some . . . [A timer sounded]

The Chair: Hon. members, it's just a 20-minute timer reminder. Would you like to continue? Yes, hon. member.

3:20

Mr. Bilous: Yes. Thank you very much, and thank you, Minister. I do appreciate sharing our time and going back and forth. I think it leads to a very robust conversation. I do, in all sincerity, Minister, appreciate having this conversation.

Let's talk a little bit about the \$8 million for the destination marketing. Now, I know that recently that's been a new focus. I don't want to call it a new mandate of Travel Alberta but a new focus of Travel Alberta. I'm curious to know, in all sincerity: if this \$8 million is only being approved today, how is Travel Alberta going to deploy this \$8 million in the course of the next couple of weeks? If you could provide a bit of a breakdown and detail on how that \$8 million will be spent.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Schweitzer: Yes. These funds are for Calgary, Edmonton, Banff, Jasper, and Canmore, the organizations that are there locally developing tourism opportunities in those regions of Alberta. It was brought to our attention by these organizations that they were facing significant fiscal pressure due to the drop in tourism and how they collect their revenue and support from industry. Industry was already facing immense pressures in the tourism industry that they rely on for their funding, so this \$8 million of support goes directly to those organizations on the ground to keep them afloat so that they can be there when we need them as we come out of the pandemic. It's designed to be there at that level.

Further funding next year for Travel Alberta is for prospective development. That additional \$22 million in the budget is for the future. This \$8 million is for those five destination marketing organizations here in Alberta.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Madam Chair. So to clarify, the dollars, the \$8 million, are going to the five local organizations. I don't know, Minister, if you're able to list them just for our viewers at home paying attention. Are these dollars being used for operations or to service debt or for staffing contingents? Is it to develop promotional materials? Is it actual destination developments or site development, or do you know how these five entities are deploying the \$8 million?

Mr. Schweitzer: I mean, the decisions on the ground are left to the individual organizations, but working with Travel Alberta and working with these organizations – and for the benefit of people at home, Calgary, Edmonton, Banff, Jasper, and Canmore are the destinations that received the support through the \$8 million, and some of those organizations were on the brink of whether or not they were going to be solvent, and some of them were facing whether or not they could pay their bills and survive going forward to the other side of the pandemic. So we thought that it was prudent, knowing that the thousands upon thousands of jobs in the tourism industry are reliant on organizations like this generating interest, helping to create that experience for people across the world to come to our province, to enjoy Alberta as a tourism destination, that we need them on the ground to be there to help us with the bounce back, to get thousands of people back to work. That's why we made that investment.

The tourism industry, as you know, has been impacted dramatically in our province. Some hotel bookings were down to 10 per cent of their regular level. That also impacts as a flow-through impact to these five organizations that are there on the ground. So we wanted to be there to support them, to make sure that they're a part of our recovery plan as it relates to tourism.

Also, ultimately, getting to success, you know, as we work towards our 2030 strategy to double revenue in the tourism industry, we need organizations like this on the ground partnering with Travel Alberta for the future, and this is there to help them get through to the other side.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. No. I appreciate that. I was looking for – I mean, I'm assuming, then, that it's going to tourism Calgary, tourism Edmonton, tourism Banff. Okay. I wasn't sure if it was – we know that there are a variety of organizations that provide additional support, promotion, et cetera – going to those entities. I appreciate the fact that they're in a position where they just need to stay afloat, and that is completely understandable. I do also appreciate the fact that there is much work that needs to be done to regain our numbers in the tourism sector, especially postpandemic.

As we've spoken, Minister, I think there's a significant opportunity to really promote and develop our tourism sector here in Alberta, especially as we see a light at the end of the tunnel when it comes to COVID, but we know that our international tourism is not going to come back overnight. It's going to take time. It's going to take work. I think there's a real opportunity within the Canadian marketplace to bring tourists here to Alberta. We know we have incredible opportunities.

My final follow-up on this: does the minister know, through you, Madam Chair, if the entities are using any of this money to help further develop destinations? I appreciate that much of it is for keeping them afloat, and if the answer is no, you know, that's okay, too. It's not a criticism. I'm just curious if any of it will be used for destination management or development.

Mr. Schweitzer: As far as the funds that are flowing through here, I mean, all of these organizations have their own individual budgets they would have for any given year. Given the impact on their revenue line, these funds were there and required to help keep these organizations afloat and whole so that they could be sustainable for the bounce back. Again, we left it to the organizations to determine how best to utilize the funds for their organization as they prepare for the future of their different strategies for the different regions of the province. We didn't want to get into the micromanaging of

saying, you know: thou shalt do A, B, and C with these funds. It's there to support them. Through this and working with them, we knew the immense amount of fiscal pressure that they were under as organizations. This is really there to help provide them with the assistance that they need to continue providing the amazing services they do across our province.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Bilous: Great. Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to turn the remainder of my time over to my colleague the MLA for Edmonton-Meadows.

An Hon. Member: Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Bilous: Edmonton-West Henday. Close.

The Chair: It's contagious.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday, would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Carson: I would appreciate a back-and-forth if possible, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Carson: Wonderful. Thank you.

Just to start, the first few of my questions, if not all of them, will be regarding the critical worker benefit. I appreciate having the opportunity here today. Now, today the minister is asking us to appropriate a large amount of money for the critical worker benefit, but as this program rolled out, we saw some major flaws, first of all the timelines. To the minister: can you tell us, first, why it took you 280 days to get this program up and running? By the time you pressed go on this program, more than 250,000 front-line workers in British Columbia had already received a cheque, so what was the holdup?

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Madam Chair. As already discussed in this House and during estimates, we wanted to work with our other departments and design a program that would work for Alberta, recognizing the special needs of Albertans. We spent a number of months working through that, and we put in place this program. I'm very pleased that we now have in place a program that sort of recognizes the tremendous efforts made by Albertans, particularly during the second wave of the pandemic, where we recognize those who were providing assistance and critical services to Albertans, including those in health care, those in social services, those in education. As well, we also recognized those employees who are in the private sector who were working during the pandemic, giving it their all, supporting our distribution systems for the supply of medicine and the supply of food. We're very pleased that we actually got this program up and running, and we're in the process of putting \$1,200, the lump-sum payment, into the pockets of Albertans right now.

I'd also like to add this. You know, there are some complexities associated with this program because we made a decision to try to limit the administrative costs associated with this to try to get it quickly and efficiently into the pockets of Albertans. This program includes not only a distribution to the private sector, which is through my department, Labour and Immigration, but there's also distribution through a number – and you can see this in the estimates – of other departments; Health, for example, Children's Services,

Community and Social Services, where they are providing direct contributions to organizations with whom they have agreements to be able to get the money into the pockets of those who are providing these services, to do that quickly and efficiently through employers who actually have the information, not only information in terms of the hours worked but also the information in terms of their bank accounts, and they can flow directly through to them. We took some time to be able to set that up, and the program is now running and getting the dollars out the door to say thank you to critical workers, who gave it their all during the pandemic.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Minister, for that answer. I just have to take a moment to reflect. The minister just spoke about one of the complexities being how to move forward and get this money in the pockets of these front-line workers in a timely fashion and as quickly as possible, yet, once again, these workers had to wait 280 days. So I find that hard to believe, that that was one of the holdups or considerations, or maybe we would have seen this move forward faster.

3:30

Now, once again, while Albertans waited 280 days in many instances, they were hoping for a reasonable plan that would include many workers who have actually been left out in one specific sector. Looking at nonprofit workers now, why does this government not seem to value those nonprofit workers? So many of them have been on the front lines of this pandemic yet now, based on the criteria for your program, do not qualify for this important benefit. What would you say to those workers who are feeling like they're being left behind by your government?

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Madam Chair. What I would say – I want to put this on the record. We did this a couple of weeks ago, but I want to state it again here for the House, that nonprofit workers are included in the program, right? As I indicated before, we have a number of delivery mechanisms for this particular program. Our department, Labour and Immigration, was responsible for the delivery to the private sector, including grocery store clerks and those working in meat packing and the transportation industry, also those working in medical clinics and pharmacies.

We were responsible for that, but other departments were responsible for directly providing funding to not-for-profit organizations, which were always intended to be part of the program. Literally hundreds of organizations and thousands of workers in the not-for-profit sector are receiving these benefits right now. I'll just give you a few examples: Wood's Homes, the Ben Calf Robe Society, Family Connections, Kids Kottage, the crisis nursery, Hull Services, Catholic Social Services, New Horizons Group Home, McMan youth. These are just to name but a few of the not-for-profit organizations that are receiving this funding.

Madam Chair, the critical worker benefit was always intended for not-for-profits. They are included in the program. The delivery mechanism is just different than what it is for the private sector because there were already relationships and funding mechanisms in place for these. They're being distributed through other line departments to make that happen and basically to be more efficient in terms of delivery of the monies to these individuals so that we can actually provide more monies to individuals, to Albertans to say thank you for their tremendous work during the pandemic.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Madam Chair, and once again thank you to the minister. You know, I just have to reflect on much of the correspondence that I've received through my office, and indeed the critic for this important portfolio and program has as well. The fact is that while the minister took a moment to name off maybe a few nonprofits who have been included, there are many more who feel that they have been left out. They want to know why, once again, this minister has prioritized certain groups of front-line workers over others.

Once again to that minister. From what we can tell, it seems that it is a higher priority for this government to fund a \$30 million war room – I think it's very relevant, looking back on some of the conversations that have happened this week – a war room that is trending for all of the wrong reasons, instead of including nonprofit workers in this critical worker benefit or other opportunities to support them through other programs. Why in your capacity as the minister didn't you go to the Finance minister and Treasury Board and demand that this government gets the program right, gets its priorities straight, and spends these funds on front-line health care heroes as opposed to, once again, picking a fight against a children's cartoon about a fictitious character with magical powers? Why weren't you having these important conversations instead of wasting your time on this ridiculousness that we've seen this week?

Thank you.

Mr. Copping: Madam Chair, to be clear, just as I indicated in my previous answer, not-for-profits are included in this program, hundreds of not-for-profit organizations, thousands of employees, so the assertions being made by the hon. member opposite are simply quite unfounded and incorrect. I do appreciate and our government appreciates the work that all Albertans have done during this pandemic. As you may know, more than 80 per cent of Alberta workers continued to work through the pandemic. They were deemed essential services and continued to work, and we wanted to recognize those who were providing critical services.

Like all provinces, there was an envelope of funding that was provided by the federal government, up to \$465 million, and the provincial government was also contributing to that amount \$118 million. We took a look at this funding, and we wanted to recognize those who were doing critical work for us. That includes those providing front-line services in health care, including our nurses and those who are doing swabs and those who are supporting our hospitals in acute care, all of the front-line workers in our hospitals and acute care, particularly recognizing the challenges that were before us and that we had to respond to given the second wave, in addition to those who are providing services to our most vulnerable: seniors in long-term care facilities as well as the children in congregate care and those with disabilities in congregate care, including low-wage workers in education.

In addition to that, not only did we recognize these public and quasi-public workers as part of the critical worker benefit program, but we also recognized those workers, as I indicated previously, that were coming to work every day and providing support for supply chains both in food and medicine, and we deemed that critically important. I understand and I want to thank all the workers who continued to work throughout the pandemic, which was 80 per cent of our overall workforce, and we thank them for going to work and continuing to provide services that Albertans need and rely upon during the pandemic.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Madam Chair. Before I move on here, I'd just reflect on the comments that we've heard so far from the

minister, and I appreciate him taking the opportunity to speak to us today. I would once again ask, as it relates to the allocation of resources that is being requested here before us today: as the minister responsible for the critical worker benefit do you believe that you have done a good job with this rollout or that your government has? Specifically, with the fact that you've taken such a long time, 280 days, do you think that you've actually done a better job because of how long you've taken? I have to question that. I think that there are a lot of workers who would have appreciated seeing this program move forward in a more timely fashion. Do you have any reservations about the time it took to move this program forward?

Mr. Copping: I want to once again thank my sister departments for getting this money out the door to not-for-profit organizations, Alberta Health Services. This money is being distributed as we speak, and we are watching as the money gets distributed. For my own department, because we recognize there are multiple channels through which we're distributing this money by my own department to the private sector, our turnaround time is not quite as good as the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation: 10 days. We're more 14 days in terms of being able to, once we get an application in, do a review and getting it out the door. But I applaud the work that's being done by my department in terms of receiving the applications. Again, we were relying upon, in terms of doing this, working with colleagues through our Alberta portal system to make an application and try to keep it as streamlined as possible, as efficient as possible, and basically get the \$1,200 into the pockets of Albertans.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Madam Chair. While we're on the topic of seeing these dollars administered and the systems that were used to do that, roughly \$200,000 has been earmarked for IT system improvements in your ministry, but the critical worker benefit, that was, once again, 280 days late, already had a security breach. To the minister of labour: how was the vendor selected, was it a sole-source contract, and what are you doing to hold people accountable for those failures?

Mr. Copping: As indicated previously, Madam Chair, you know, our government is committed to ensuring personal information remains secure and protected once it reaches a government server. As soon as the government of Alberta was aware a couple of weeks ago that there was a technical issue, we took immediate action. We temporarily shut down the portal, and then we quickly resolved it to get it back up and running so that applications could be made again. I just want to assure this House and all Albertans that we are taking every step possible, including working with the Privacy Commissioner and Service Alberta to make sure that nothing like this happens again. All affected employees will be contacted as soon as possible – sorry; they have been contacted. We can confirm that we provided credit monitoring to affected employees to ensure the protection of their identity, personal information, and credit. We are continuing to work with Service Alberta on this issue, and they've assured us that this technical issue is addressed and won't be happening again.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

3:40

The Chair: Hon. members, it's the second block of 20 minutes.

Hon. member, would you just like to proceed with sharing time?

Mr. Carson: That would be appreciated. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Thank you. Now, I'm going to repeat that question because, unfortunately, while the minister gave us an answer, it wasn't an answer to any of the questions that I had asked. So one more time: based on the failures of the administration of this IT system, how was the vendor selected, was there an expression of interest, was it a sole-source contract, and finally, if you can explain how many people were affected? You had mentioned that the ministry had reached out to the people who had been affected. Can you tell us exactly how many people were affected by that?

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. In regard to the final question, the number of people, there was a potential of just approximately 225 individuals whose information could have been seen. I just want to clarify this. We can confirm that the information was not accessed or shared outside of the portal, and the individuals who could have seen it were other employers who were actually applying to this. We can confirm that that wasn't accessed by the portal, but there was a potential that those 200 or so individuals' information could have been seen, and we have subsequently reached out to it.

In regard to the process by which the portal was built, we worked with Service Alberta in terms of building the portal on their platform, and they leveraged their contacts and outside vendors to be able to do that type of work, as is typical that Service Alberta will do.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate that answer.

Just finally here, maybe one final question for myself and we'll move on for now. During the main estimates the minister of labour couldn't answer how many contractors were working on the critical worker benefit, but now he's asking again for an additional appropriation to fund this program. To the minister of labour: how many contracts are currently working on this program?

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Madam Chair. In the meeting I provided a brief number. The reason why I wanted to get back to you – we are actually writing a memo which will be provided to the chair based on the estimates; that's just not quite completed yet but should be within the next couple of days – is because the information and the way it's provided is done on a full-time equivalent basis. Of course, this is a short-term program. The question that was being asked by your colleague was, you know: what is the total number working? Approximately there are 115 staff currently working to deliver the critical worker benefit for Labour and Immigration. This consists of both temporary employees and existing staff who are temporarily redeployed to assist with that program.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate, once again, the opportunity to ask some of these questions. I think that we will have more regarding this important program, but for now I would like to pass the remainder of my time to the Member for Calgary-McCall.

Thank you.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, would you also like to share your time?

Mr. Sabir: Sure.

The Chair: All right. There are 16 minutes and 30 seconds remaining.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. Some general comments that in the last three budgets we hear every day how the government will spend responsibly, and that's a pillar of their this-year budget as well, but here we are. The government is asking for \$1.3 billion, pretty much a blank cheque, with very limited information. As long as this money is going to protecting Albertans' health and creating jobs for Albertans, we certainly support that. The thing is that they're asking for more money at a time when we have a debt of almost a hundred billion dollars and three straight deficits of \$12 billion, \$24.2 billion, and \$18 billion, but they still continue to spend on things like the energy war room, the energy inquiry, and those kinds of things. That's deeply concerning, that at a time when we have so much debt and our economy is not doing that well, we are not looking at opportunities to save. Instead, we are asking Albertans for more money and putting a further drag on the province and adding to the debt.

There is some discussion already about small and medium-sized business enterprises, the business relaunch. Certainly, those who received that support appreciate it, but there are some who were left out. I think I have raised that question earlier. The Minister of Treasury Board and Finance, in his remarks, talked about that that relaunch was for those businesses who were asked to shut down. The question we have asked about, for instance, the cab industry – they were not asked by this government to shut down. Just a clarifying question. They do not qualify for that relaunch grant. Again, Minister of Finance, minister of jobs or labour, anyone can confirm that.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Madam Chair. Again, I think this question was raised in question period yesterday. One of the things that we made sure that we did with the relaunch grant was to allow for sole proprietors to be able to become eligible for the program. We know that many people that are in cabs as well as ride-sharing organizations like Uber and others fall into the sole proprietor category versus incorporated entities. We did make changes to the relaunch grant to be able to allow for sole proprietors to be eligible. That was a change that came into effect for people who could apply in February of this year. Again, it is based off the revenue impacts to the businesses and health orders that are there as well. Again, in this area here, it's designed for people that have been impacted by health measures.

I'll gladly look into this further. If you have constituents as well that have been impacted, that have struggled to access different supports, I'll gladly follow up as well. We do have a few more weeks here of eligible applications that can come through. Sometimes as well it's just more walking people through the process on our end. I'm happy to follow up with you. I know you've raised it passionately in the House and other places. I'm happy to follow up. I know we've had it raised by a few of the other members on our side as well. I'm happy to take a look at it to see what we can do to help make sure we have supports for the businesses that have been impacted during this pandemic.

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

Mr. Sabir: Just a quick clarifying question. The mandatory nature of the government asking them to shut down remains a criterion to qualify for that. Is that true?

Mr. Schweitzer: Got a very short question. As it relates to this, the parameters do have businesses that are impacted by health measures. Again, if there's anything specific to individual business – we've been doing this in real time throughout the pandemic. Initially, when we launched this – this was early on in the pandemic – we noticed halfway through or as we got into the second wave that we had to make transitional changes for businesses that started up during the pandemic. Again, we've been working, you know, closely with industry representatives – the restaurant industry, the hospitality sector, other organizations – to make sure that the relaunch grant is designed in a way for people to access it.

You know, if there is a further gap, happy to take a look at it to make sure that businesses that have been impacted during the health measures are supported. I know that particularly as it relates to our airports – you know, a lot of the people require transportation to and from airports. There's a lot of impact that can happen there. Happy to take a look at it. It is designed not industry specific. It's designed for there to be kind of a more holistic program that just says: impacted by health measures; here's your revenue decline; eligibility; and get the funds out the door. We've tried to design it in as streamlined a way as possible. Again, happy to take a look at it in further detail if you have more specifics that you want to go through with constituents or other people, see if there is a potential gap. Happy to take a look at it as well.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Minister. Sure. I would really appreciate if you can look into it because the constituents I spoke to aren't sole proprietors, contractors when they drive cabs, and what they are telling me is that one of the requirements is that you have to be asked by the government to shut down, and then you qualify. Based on that criterion, they do not qualify, and I would appreciate if you'd look into it.

3:50

I'll also note that there is a large amount of money that's being appropriated here for the critical worker benefit. We do know that government took a while to roll that benefit out, almost 280 days, and by the time this government asked for that benefit – in comparison, like, British Columbia has distributed it to almost 250,000 residents, so we are far behind in that distribution. The question I have is whether government will be able to distribute all that money, give all that money to those who qualify before the end of this month. That's a question for the minister of labour.

The Chair: The Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. We are working right now to distribute the money. As indicated previously, we have multiple distribution mechanisms through line departments such as Health, Children's Services, Community and Social Services, and also through Labour and Immigration. In Labour and Immigration we're receiving applications right now, and we're getting it out the door. Similarly, Health also has a separate distribution mechanism to private-sector health organizations. That is up and running, and our intention is to be able to get all the money out the door by the end of this fiscal year. That's being distributed as we speak right now, and my understanding is that we're on track.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will cede my time to my colleague, the critic for culture and status of women.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton–Castle Downs, would you like to share the remaining time?

Ms Goehring: Yes, please.

The Chair: All right. You have just under eight minutes. Please, go ahead.

Ms Goehring: Thank you. My questions are for the Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women. I only have a few questions. On the top of page 4 of the request for supplementary supply we see three Treasury Board decisions. Can the minister give a quick, 30-second summary of each Treasury Board decision in the documents, specifically 98/2020, 145/2020, and 182/2021?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and the Status Women.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. We're really honoured to be here today. I want to thank our head of Treasury Board for the opportunity to be able to be here to ask for extra dollars, especially for a sector that has been hit so hard. They were the first ones to go down and quite possibly will be the last to come back up again along with the tourism sector.

The sections that the member is talking about are specifically related to the stabilize program. The stabilize program came out of a need that we saw. Part of our sector, as we had spoken about in estimates last night, is a sector that has a lot of taxpayer dollars that have already gone into them, pieces of infrastructure that are sitting idle at this point in time. Many of them also are required to have people in their venues in order to be able to carry through at this point in time. Further to that point, many of the for-profit sectors and those that are in the arts and culture support sectors are very reliant on many of these venues.

The three pieces that you're talking about are specifically around rodeos, around the live sector experiences, and then around some of the larger venues. If you'd like, I can send you a bit more detailed information about that. I'd be happy to do that.

The most important piece around this, why we're here, is because the sector is impacted so deeply, to make sure that those venues have the space to keep their heads above water. If they go under, if these pieces of infrastructure – and again, like I mentioned before, millions and millions, actually potentially billions, of taxpayer dollars have gone into these. We wanted to make sure that they had some funds to keep their heads above water up until the point that hopefully – hopefully – we're all back together, sitting in those seats and watching live performances, football games, hockey, everything that makes this province a beautiful place to live and to function.

In terms of what we're providing in this particular – what we've asked for at this point is \$17 million, so \$12 million of that will be going directly into the stabilize program. Then we have a \$5 million stabilization: it's a way to be able to leverage those dollars for dollar-for-dollar matching. It's from a minimum of \$250,000 up to \$1 million. Actually, it was really amazing. The very first day that we brought the program forward, the Winspear was able to raise a million dollars almost immediately, so it was a really well-received program. It's an important way to be able to look at the sector right now, to be able to stretch our dollars to the best of our ability. We're

really hoping that that \$5 million will translate into more dollars into the sector.

I think that probably the most important thing at this point in time is that we have to make sure that these venues are available to our wonderful artists, musicians, people that are promoters of culture. I think what ends up happening a lot of times is that people forget what a cultural hub Alberta is. I think we were talking about this last night, that we're very, very sorely underfunded for the arts from the federal government, so we fought really, really hard for dollars that are going to come in so that the east understands and respects the cultural hub that Alberta is. Hopefully, these dollars will be able to help sustain these organizations and keep them going so that in the next few months, as we vaccinate, get ourselves healthy, and get ourselves back together, we will be able to join each other at these venues, hopefully many. Hopefully, we'll all be running all over the place to put our dollars back into these concert halls and get those bums back in the seats.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much to the chair, and thank you, Minister, for that response. Further to the stabilize program, in the '20-21 year you stated that you're providing \$22 million for the stabilize program, then in this upcoming budget \$15 million. Will this \$15 million include supports for the organizations in that sector that were specifically ineligible for the \$22 million in supports already announced? And then, as you've talked about and we talked about yesterday evening in estimates – we talked about the importance of being able to support live music venues, landmark cultural events. Like you mentioned, these industries have been hit the hardest with the public health measures, so I'm curious if there's anything being done to make sure that all of those that actually need the supports are going to be eligible to have access to them, if the criteria have changed along with this additional funding.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you. It's a great question. The dollars that are going out right now in the initial stabilize program are for the ones that we've spoken about, so they're particularly – again, I'm happy to send you the list of what that looks like. We're still assessing some of the other organizations that we talked about last night, for-profit organizations, for-profit musicians. We still have a lot of consultations that we have to do to assess and see where further dollars will go.

But specific to this budget and specifically why we're here, those dollars – and if you're wondering about the \$22 million, we leveraged another \$5 million from our ministry at this point in time to help with that stabilize program, so that's where that extra money is coming from, and then we were able to receive some from Treasury Board in order to help us out. The dollars from Treasury Board are new dollars, but we were able to leverage dollars from within the ministry, which we're really proud of, to have been able to put them towards the stabilize because, honestly, at this point in time this is about being flexible and understanding that initially what your budgets are going to go to when you're in the middle of COVID and the middle of an economic crisis – you have to be flexible and be able to put those dollars where they're needed. As we go forward, other dollars that are coming forward: I'd be happy to discuss that. But with respect to the dollars that are here, it is directed to those organizations right now.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Goehring: Thank you. On pages 14, 15, the sport and cultural event relaunch program: I'm assuming that this program is referring to the stabilize program?

Mrs. Aheer: To your question: yes.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Goehring: Thank you. The fiscal plan on page 115 stated that the stabilize program will provide up to \$37 million over the '20-21 and '21-22 budget years. The breakdown of that is \$22 million for '20-21. To get that \$22 million for this program, we need to add up the \$14.7 million being requested in the supplementary supply and the \$5 million appropriated through Treasury Board decision 182/2021, noted on page 4 of the supplementary supply documents, which you made reference to. Where do we find a record of this decision, and why did you choose to appropriate those funds through a Treasury Board decision as opposed to one of the two supplementary bills that have been seen in this House?

4:00

The Chair: Hon. minister, in 17 seconds.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you. Supplementary supply: the entire reason for that is to be able to apply for extra dollars because of the situation that is going on in our ministry right now, so that's why we made that application to Treasury Board.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. member for three seconds.

Hon. members, that concludes our first hour of supplementary supply for the members of the Official Opposition.

We will now proceed to a 20-minute block for members of the government caucus. I see the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod. Would you like to share your time?

Mr. Reid: I'd love to share the time with the minister.

The Chair: Wonderful. Please proceed.

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Madam Chair. Frequently we've heard the Minister of Finance describe the current economic situation in Alberta as a triple black swan event, which includes the downturn in oil prices, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic downturn as a result of world-wide lockdowns. This, understandably, has caused a dramatic change in the province's finances and, accordingly, a substantive increase in requests for supplementary supply. Through you, Chair, to the Minister of Finance: can you please describe how this triple black swan event has impacted our provincial revenues and our provincial spending?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Madam Chair and to the member for the question. The pandemic and the resulting economic crash has had a great impact on the province's revenues. In fact, for the current year that we're in the impact is just under \$8 billion in terms of the decline of revenues as we're projecting here in Q3. That would be almost \$3 billion in terms of resource revenue reduction, around \$2 billion in corporate tax revenue reduction, and approximately 1 and a half billion dollars in personal income tax revenue reduction. Almost every line in the Alberta government's income statement in terms of revenues was reduced as a result of the pandemic and the great economic collapse.

In terms of expenses we have necessarily had to increase expenses to deal with the pandemic; firstly, to ensure that Health was adequately resourced. We've allocated an additional \$2 billion to Health so that AHS and Health in general can deal with the challenges of the pandemic. We've allocated an additional \$3.8 billion for economic relief and economic recovery, again, given the great challenge that the pandemic has posed to Alberta businesses and to individuals right across this province.

One thing I do want to point out is that, again, as we projected in Q3 as a result of our Budget 2021 process, our Q3 report would indicate that if you exclude our COVID response and our economic relief and recovery response, our operating expenses were actually \$500 million lower than budget, and that was almost across ministries as ministries continue to work to deliver more efficiently, and that's not insignificant, again, with reference to the fact that we inherited a government spending trajectory that was increasing by 4 per cent per year even though revenues were remaining flat.

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

Mr. Reid: I'd like to cede the rest of my time to my colleague from Lacombe-Ponoka, please.

Mr. Orr: As is well known by now, the former NDP government entered into a disastrous crude-by-rail contract that this government has spent the last couple of year trying to clean up. This government was in the final stages of extracting Albertans from this disastrous program and minimizing the impact the reckless investment had on taxpayers, but when COVID-19 hit, it put things off the rails, so to speak. I now see on page 22 of the supplementary supply documents that Energy is requesting \$274.8 million for crude-by-rail contractual obligations that are still following us. Can the Minister of Energy explain how these \$274 million will be used to fix the previous NDP government's mess and what sort of long-term savings we're looking at by actually ending this program?

Thank you.

The Chair: The Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Chair and to the member for the question. It's a very pertinent question relative to supplementary supply. It's a very pertinent question that I think Albertans will be interested in.

Firstly, we had inherited commitments and obligations from the previous government with respect to crude by rail. As we had committed during the campaign, when we took office we immediately worked to assign those contracts and that capacity to the private sector, where it belonged originally, so that we could reduce the risk and, in fact, extricate Albertans from the risk of crude by rail. That risk was very significant.

We worked hard to assign those contracts, and on March 31, 2020, we had deals on all of those contracts and obligations although there was a portion, a number of those arrangements, that weren't fully completed, the contracts weren't fully assigned. While we were very successful in assigning a significant amount of our crude-by-rail obligations, there were some contracts that weren't fully assigned. The request in supplementary supply is required so that we can continue to meet our contractual obligations with respect to crude by rail.

At the same time we're working hard to assign those contracts onto the private sector. Unfortunately, right now, because of the significant drop in energy prices that we experienced earlier this year and the remaining very narrow differential – that differential is defined as the difference in price between west Texas intermediate prices and western Canadian select prices. Because of

that narrow differential these crude-by-rail contracts really have very little value today, but APMC continues to work hard, Energy continues to work hard to assign those contracts. In the meantime we're meeting our obligations, the obligations that we inherited from the previous government.

I do want to add that the total commitment in those obligations was \$3.7 billion, Madam Chair, to move 120,000 barrels per day for a mere two years. At the same time the government in place at the time, which were the members opposite, brought in a competing policy measure called curtailment. If curtailment would be successful, it would categorically mean that the crude-by-rail commitments and investment would be a massive money loser, and that's exactly what has happened. It was predictable. That has been the result of what I would suggest was a very irresponsible commitment by the members opposite, risking \$3.7 billion to move 120,000 barrels per day for a mere 24 months.

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

Mr. Orr: If I may, I'll cede the next question to MLA Guthrie.

The Chair: Hon. member, I will just caution the use of names in this Assembly.

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Cochrane.

Mr. Guthrie: Thank you. Oil and gas companies have been hit hard by the triple crisis that our province is facing, namely the COVID-19 pandemic, a massive global recession, and the unprecedented collapse in energy prices. As we know, Alberta's oil and gas sector is vitally important for jobs and economic growth in this province. The success of our energy sector impacts our ability to fund health care, education, and social programs. This is also why it is frustrating that we have to focus resources into repairing the reckless mistakes of the previous NDP government and why fiscal responsibility and finding savings in our budget are so important. Page 22 mentions that \$170 million has been made available from lower than budgeted expenses in some other programs, which page 24 identifies as line items climate change and economic recovery, which will also be applied to the crude-by-rail contractual obligations.

Can the Minister of Finance explain the lower than budgeted expenses in these line items and how applying them to market access line item will help to clean up the NDP's crude-by-rail fiasco?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. Certainly, the Minister of Energy will be able to go into more detail with respect to those specific line items. I know the Minister of Energy and the ministers of every government department have been working hard to find efficiencies to transform the way they deliver programs so that, in fact, they can deliver more efficiently and effectively. That should be an ongoing effort of every government at all times, and the Minister of Energy has certainly been working to that end.

Madam Chair, that's why we also have, really, I believe, our second fiscal anchor. Again, our fiscal anchors are going to be informing this government with respect to fiscal decisions until we can determine a fresh timeline and path to balance. But that's why our second fiscal anchor is ensuring that we're delivering government services at least as efficiently as comparator provinces as measured by our per capita cost of delivering government services, again, as compared to other provinces. That's why that fiscal anchor is so important. It gives us a metric to measure against.

4:10

Madam Chair, as you no doubt recall and all the members in this House would recall, we inherited a government that on a per capita basis was spending over \$10 billion more per year in delivering government services than our comparator provinces. That's why this fiscal anchor is so critical. In fact, we embarked on this effort back in Budget 2019, a very credible budget, to get us to balance in our first term. COVID-19, the resulting economic collapse, the energy price collapse has gotten in the way of that goal, but we are using these fiscal anchors to ensure, firstly, that we maintain a relatively strong balance sheet when we emerge from the pandemic; secondly, to ensure that we have a measurable as we work to delivery government services most efficiently.

Madam Chair, that respects all Albertans, both the recipients of that service delivery and the taxpayers that fund it.

Mr. Guthrie: Thank you, Minister.

Chair, I'd like to cede my time to the Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Glasgo: Thank you, Madam Chair. My question as well is for the Minister of Finance. Our government was elected on fiscal responsibility, including the clamping down on reckless deficit spending and government debt that the previous government left behind. We know that it's irresponsible to be passing on this debt to further generations and burdening them with other government's problems. Considering the economic situation, the minister has previously indicated that we can no longer reach our target of a balanced budget by 2022-2023, but we know that balanced budgets are a key fiscal anchor that international lenders consider when setting lending rates.

Considering the importance of strong fiscal anchors, which the minister was referencing and talking about before in response to other members, can the Minister of Finance please explain which measures and targets the government of Alberta is adopting to demonstrate fiscal prudence to international lenders? Some have also been calling for the implementation of a provincial sales tax. Can the minister also comment on that issue and elaborate on our plans to return to balance? I know that my constituents would really appreciate that.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Chair and to the member for that very important question. There were really three questions, and I'll work to answer each one.

Firstly, with respect to implementing a provincial sales tax, yes, some Albertans are advocating that we simply increase taxes, and right now would be the worst time to add additional financial burden and strain on Alberta businesses and Albertans generally as we feel the pressure, the economic pressure, of the pandemic and related economic effects. Madam Chair, that's why Budget 2021 has no tax increase whatsoever. That's why we're focused, firstly, on ensuring Health is resourced to meet the challenges of the pandemic, positioning the province for economic recovery and a continued focus on efficient delivery of government services. Until we can find economic clarity postpandemic, which at that point we will define a new path and timeline to balance, until we get there, we will use fiscal anchors to inform our decisions, our fiscal decisions. I've mentioned the first one. That is ensuring that we keep our net debt-to-GDP below 30 per cent. That will ensure that

we can maintain a relatively strong balance sheet and which will position the province for fiscal recovery.

Secondly – and I mentioned this earlier, but it bears repeating – is that we will in this fiscal plan, in fact, in the fiscal plan that we've outlined, laid out in Budget 2021, we will bring our cost of delivering government services on a per capita basis in line with comparator provinces. Madam Chair, we absolutely owe it to Albertans to deliver at least as efficiently.

Madam Chair, I agree with the member in the assertion that she made in her question that balancing the budget is critically important, that we cannot pass along our excessive spending onto future generations. That's why these fiscal anchors are so critically important. By adhering to them, we will position this province for fiscal recovery.

The Chair: The Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Glasgo: Thank you, Madam Chair. I will cede my time to the Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Mr. Turton: Thank you, Madam Chair. One of the key elements of the province's response to the triple black-swan event was enacting Alberta's recovery plan. As the plan resulted in additional transfers to ministries and new emergency programs, there is likely to be some small additional cost with respect to delivering these programs as well as the cost of the programs themselves. To the minister: can you please describe how much of the additional funding went into new program delivery versus program administration? Second, is the administration of the programs in line with the delivery costs of other government programs?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Chair, and I thank the member for that really intuitive question. Every time a government program is developed, there are administrative costs that are required to administer that program. It's critically important that governments focus on efficient delivery of government services, including efficient delivery of the programs that are designed to support Albertans and Alberta businesses.

[Ms Glasgo in the chair]

To provide an answer to the member's specific question, with respect to the site rehabilitation program for 2020-2021, the current fiscal year, the year that these estimates relate to, the cost of administering that program is estimated to be approximately \$1 million, and that is to administer approximately \$251 million in programming for the site rehabilitation program.

With respect to the critical worker benefit program – this is a \$435 million program – the estimated cost for the current year, that we're in today, is \$2.5 million. For the Alberta jobs now program, which is expected to be a \$63 million program – and, of course, we're budgeting additional funding for the following year – for the current year we're expecting administrative costs to be \$2 million.

Madam Chair, when it comes to developing programs in short order, programs that are going to be delivered on a one-time basis, while I don't have any definitive metrics in front of me, my expectation is that the administrative cost to develop the programs and roll them out would be higher than for a program that will be reappearing year after year after year in the fiscal plan. However, right now there is great need amongst Albertans and Alberta businesses, and it's critically important that we roll these programs

out, making sure they're designed as efficiently as possible to ensure that we're not creating any additional and minimizing the impact of red tape and regulatory burden on Albertans and Alberta businesses but rolling them out on a timely basis so that they can benefit the intended recipients of the program.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair. This time I'd like to cede the rest of my time to the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair. As businesses have been asked to make an immense number of sacrifices during this pandemic to keep all of us healthy, Alberta's government has supported these organizations through initiatives such as the small to medium-sized enterprise relaunch grant to help those that saw their revenues reduced due to COVID-19 related closures or curtailments. In December the SME relaunch grant was expanded to allow second payments and lower the threshold for eligibility. On page 30 of the supplementary supply document it outlines that \$381 million is being requested, of which \$373 million is for the small and medium enterprise relaunch grant program. Can the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation comment on how much of the money that was given to the SME relaunch grant has been allocated and how many Albertans are employed by companies that have received this funding?

Thank you.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for that question. Again, we've highlighted this earlier on, but I'll kind of provide an overview as well given the nature of the questions. When we first had the first wave of the pandemic, we knew that we had to provide further supports to small businesses across Alberta, so we provided the relaunch grant of up to \$5,000 for small businesses and budgeted \$200 million for that program. As we got into the second wave – arguably, some people might say that it's the third wave – the wave over the holidays in particular, we knew that we had to bring in further health measures and provide additional support to small businesses here in Alberta, so we increased the relaunch grant per small business eligible up to \$20,000, and we increased the budget at that point in time to \$500 million.

[Mrs. Pitt in the chair]

Dealing with, you know, the pandemic in real time, it was brought to our attention that sole proprietors as well as small businesses that started up during the pandemic were having challenges qualifying for the relaunch grant, so we made further changes to the program to include them as eligible companies and businesses and increased the budget to \$575 million for this fiscal year.

4:20

The Chair: Hon. members, that concludes the 20-minute block for government caucus members.

We will now proceed to a 10-minute portion for members of the Official Opposition. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Madam Chair. If possible, I'll go back and forth with the Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women. Thank you.

A follow-up from my last question. If we add the Treasury Board decisions along with the supplementary supply estimates, we get a total of \$28.8 million in additional funding requested for this ministry. However, increases to spending on the same lines only add up \$8 million according to the numbers on pages 176, 180, and 181. In fact, if we look at both statements of operations on page 28 of the 2021-24 business plan, it shows an increase of only \$9 million in your statement of operations. Can you please explain this discrepancy?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women.

Mrs. Aheer: Yeah. Thank you for the question. The money is being split over this part of the budget, which we're in right now for supplementary supply, and then there will be other dollars that will be applied for later on into the next fiscal. We also had \$5 million that we reallocated within the budget ourselves, and then we have \$5 million of fundraising. When you add that up, it kind of gets you to that point. You can sort of see where those dollars are coming from at that point.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Madam Chair. When we look on page 14, I'm curious: what sectors will not be receiving the \$2.7 million in funding due to the reallocation or the lower than budgeted expenses?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you so much. Like we discussed in estimates last night, some of the dollars we reallocated from the CFEP grants and then put them into the stabilize grants. This is just a temporary allocation for this year, and then the dollars for CFEP will go back to where they were.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Goehring: Thank you. There was \$1.8 million available in the November supplementary supply for the same reason. I also noted that the forecasted spending for '20-21 capital grants is expected to be about \$4 million less than budgeted. Was the bulk of the savings found by reducing capital grants such as CFEP? I'm curious if this is one of the reasons why perhaps you haven't been meeting with the community leagues.

Mrs. Aheer: Well, no. Community leagues just sent us a letter about a week and a half ago. Like I said to you last night, I'm happy to meet with them. There's nobody that we won't meet with; it's just that there's only a certain number of hours in the day to make those meetings happen. Like I said to you yesterday, I'm super happy to meet with those folks. No; it has nothing to do with that.

We reallocated dollars right now, like I said to you earlier. Again, I want to thank, you know, our Minister of Finance for understanding the importance of this sector, for understanding how important it is to make sure that we're able to put dollars in to keep the sector alive for this next little while, especially as we come out of COVID. I think what's really important to understand is that within our budgets we've had to find flexibility to look at the programming to see how it is that we can reallocate dollars. There are finite dollars.

I look at my budget this year, considering the fact that we've been through an economic downturn. You know, our oil and gas dollars

had been so far down for so long. Our manufacturing sector and so many of our sectors have been impacted not only by the economic downturn but also because of COVID. When I look at our budget and what I have available to us, these hard-earned taxpayer dollars, it takes a little bit of savvy to look within that and look at those dollars and see how best to allocate them at this time.

When we spoke to organizations like the sectors that are being helped out right now by that stabilize program, they were very, very – it was a really great conversation. Many conversations actually happened – a lot of round-tables, a lot of talks – around how best to allocate those dollars.

I also have to say that this government is making the largest dollar impact amount in infrastructure that has happened in the history of this province, and as I was explaining to you last night, a lot of the infrastructure pieces that happen through our ministry actually are in collaboration with the Minister of Infrastructure. For example, Vivo, Telus, Calgary Zoo – all of those things that happened – largely are also done through the Minister of Infrastructure. We feel really, really honoured to be able to work in collaboration with him to make sure that those infrastructure dollars are still being spent for important cultural events and that infrastructure that's necessary.

Right now the stabilize dollars and the dollars that we took out of CFEP in order to help with this program: those were some dollars that were allocated, and then there was some new money that came from Treasury Board in order to help supplement that. We needed to make sure that these hard-earned taxpayer dollars, that we are so blessed to have, are going into organizations like the ones that are being supported through stabilize, that have hundreds of millions and sometimes billions of dollars that have been put into these pieces of infrastructure. They're sitting idle right now.

Some of that was also absorbed by our ministry. We had to absorb revenue losses, massive revenue losses. All of the infrastructure that the government is not only responsible for but puts tax dollars into had absolutely zero dollars coming in this year. That was tens of millions of dollars that was absorbed by our ministry in order to make sure that places like the Jubilee will be sustainable and survive through this, so that when we open up again, those beautiful, beautiful buildings, that have been supported and paid for by taxpayer dollars, will continue to function, like you had mentioned yesterday, the Winspear and other organizations like that.

You were asking about other organizations and the one that you are speaking to directly, and I'm really super happy to meet with them. Our CIP grants: some money was allocated into the CIP in order to be able to help the stabilize program. We're going to be able to help out community a lot more. This is about building back community. It's about making sure that community can ramp up once we come out of COVID. It is going to be the culture sectors that help put this province back together. If you talk to the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation, we speak about this all the time.

So much of the work that we do is very collaborative because those sectors – one of the MLAs was talking about bringing tourism, bringing people back to this province. If you look at the film industry, the reason why we had people filming here is because Alberta had the pilot program and was allowing people to actually come into this province to keep the economy going. Even at a time when the rest of the world was shutting down, we were allowing for people to come here. You look at a movie like *Land*, that was just filmed here recently, an amazing project that was done as a result of the work that was done by this government to keep the economy going. We're doing everything we can to leverage these very precious dollars that we have to the best of our ability.

For anybody who's watching today, I hope that you understand that we feel very privileged as a government to have hard-earned taxpayer dollars to put into important programs. It's not our money. We are here to facilitate that, and we will do that to the best of our ability. I feel truly honoured that this government sees this ministry as being so important to the recovery and the relaunch of this province and all of the important things that will come along with that. I'm really looking forward to seeing how the stabilize program goes forward, and again thank you to the Minister of Finance and to your team for speaking with us and working with us to make sure that this sector has legs to ramp up once we get out of COVID.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Goehring: Thank you. Unfortunately, that wasn't an answer, but I will cede my time to the Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. A time check?

The Chair: Two minutes.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. Some questions, then, for the Minister of Health. Let's begin with a simple one. We have \$13 million set aside for comfort care aides. Through you to the minister: how many full-time employees, then, are represented in that \$13 million?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, Madam Chair, I'm told that it's 1,600, but I'm not sure if that's a definition of just the positions or the FTEs. I'd be happy to be able to get back to the hon. member on that distinction as soon as I get that information from the ministry.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. Regarding some of the capital expenditures, the \$24,443,000 for equipment to support surge capacity, et cetera, does that amount include the cost for the field hospital that was constructed at the Butterdome at the University of Alberta?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Health.

4:30

Mr. Shandro: No. That was a rental that was separate, Madam Chair. That was an amount that came elsewhere in the budget. It was a rental. We rented that tent from the Red Cross. The other equipment that was included in being able to commission that contingency plan was provided elsewhere in the amount of equipment and staff that AHS required and being able to establish that contingency plan that was in the Butterdome for our response to COVID.

The Chair: The hon. member, 12 seconds.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. Time check?

The Chair: Eight seconds.

Mr. Shepherd: Eight seconds. Thank you. I'll look forward to asking some further questions to the minister in a moment.

The Chair: Sounds good.

We'll now move on to the next 10-minute block with members of the government caucus. I will recognize the hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Ms Rosin: Thank you, Madam Chair. Well, destination marketing organizations play a very critical role in raising awareness and marketing Alberta's incredible tourism locations to not only the rest of our country and our province but to the entire world, and I am fortunate to represent some of those tourism communities, who are the most googleable, picturesque places imaginable. I see that on page 30 of the supplemental supply document, it outlines \$8 million that is requested for destination marketing organizations as part of Alberta's recovery plan. I believe this \$8 million is for five specific DMOs, two of which reside in my constituency, being Banff & Lake Louise Tourism and Tourism Canmore Kananaskis. I'm just wondering if the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation can explain how the funding to these destination marketing organizations was used and how this supports Alberta's communities, and if he has any breakdown of how much money is going to each one of the five.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Madam Chair. It strikes me that from time to time, you know, people reference God's country in this Legislature. Nothing starts a tussle, particularly on this side, more than anything else than when people start to say "which community is truly God's country in Alberta?" when they talk about the beauty of our province. I must say, though, that I do believe for the purposes of this commentary, which may be clipped for that particular member from Banff, that it is one of the most beautiful places in the world and truly could be considered in the top five for God's country in Alberta. Top five at least, maybe number one or two.

Madam Chair, when it comes to making sure that we can share the beauty of the Banff community, Lake Louise, Canmore, Kananaskis with the world, we wanted to make sure that we had the pillars in place to bounce back in our tourism industry. It has been impacted dramatically during this pandemic. Alberta relies on international travel to bring in tourists to Alberta. Banff is the most visited national park in Canada. It is truly a gem in our country, and we want to make sure that the organizations on the ground have the resources to market their communities, to be there to support the tourism industry across Alberta as it relates to this. Many of them were impacted with their own revenue streams during this pandemic. We want to make sure that they can maintain their solvency because they do play such a critical role in the bounce back of Alberta's economy going forward. To that member: thank you for your continued advocacy on behalf of your community.

I just want to highlight as well that for the budget coming forward, tourism is important. We've put additional money into Travel Alberta, \$22 million. We've put additional funding into film and television, which helps spur tourism into your jurisdiction. We really want to make sure that it's truly a highlight of the Alberta experience, the whole area of her constituency.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Ms Rosin: Thank you, Madam Chair. I will cede the rest of my time to the Member for Sherwood Park.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Mr. Walker: Thank you so much, Madam Chair. It's an honour to rise to speak to and contribute to the 2020-21 supplementary supply

estimates and ask a question to the Minister of Children's Services. We know that child care is integral to our economic recovery as quality child care helps parents enter or re-enter the workforce while knowing their kids are safe and cared for. We also know that here in Alberta that parents value choice. The reality is that every family and family situation is different, and it's parents who are best positioned to make the right choices for their family.

I can see in the 2020-21 supplementary supply estimates that the Minister of Children's Services requested \$11.5 million for child care rebates to parents. Can the Minister of Children's Services please explain why she has requested this additional funding be added to the child care subsidy, which Albertans were eligible for the support, and how many Albertan families will be impacted as a result?

Thank you.

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for that very important question. What we've seen in the last year is that working families are facing all kinds of additional pressure and extra costs during the pandemic. This is for two things. There is a lot of uncertainty, obviously, around the economy, which we've talked a lot about in the first couple of hours today, but also just with the realities that families are facing with the pandemic. Some parents have lost their jobs, some are working fewer hours, and I think it would be fair to say that all families have experienced more anxiety and stress. We've also seen some parents working from home. As a result, fewer families have been using the licensed child care system this year, so money that we would normally be investing in subsidies for parents accessing licensed child care in the province has not fully been spent.

As you can see in our supply estimates, child care subsidy supports increased by a total of \$22.9 million, and that's in line 3.1. I can break that down. This increase is a result of two amounts being added to the child care subsidy supports 2020-2021 budget; \$11.5 million of unspent wage top-up funding was also moved to 3.1, child care subsidy supports, from 3.2, which was the child care worker supports. We thought that the working parent benefit of \$108 million was an important investment to make to support the unique challenges that parents are facing at this time, so under the working parents benefit we are providing \$108 million directly to support the needs of working parents, those parents who need it the most and who have faced a lot of uncertainty and hardship over the last year.

Up to 100,000 families right across Alberta and 192,000 children will receive this benefit. Families with a household income of \$100,000 or less and have spent at least \$561 in at least three months of child care between April and December of last year will qualify. I do want to reiterate something that we've talked about a lot in this House: parent choice. We know that parents are best positioned to make choices for their family and that the choices that they make vary for a variety of reasons. There really is no one-size-fits-all approach, especially so, I would argue, over the last year with the difficult decisions that parents are making. Whether your child is enrolled in a licensed daycare, a licensed out-of-school care program, a preschool, or an unlicensed day home, Madam Chair, parents that use any form of child care can be eligible for that working parents benefit.

We heard from parents across Alberta at the event where we announced this. We actually heard from a single mom. Her name is Tiffany-Joy Robertson, and she said, "It's great to see the government recognize the pressures that working parents are facing. As a single mother who has felt the stresses of work and

child care this past year, this money is greatly appreciated." We also heard from a child care operator and operators right across this province, but the one who, again, hosted us to make the announcement of this \$108 million, Janet St. Germain, Madam Chair, said:

As an operator, we've received substantial support from this government throughout the pandemic. But, these times are challenging for everyone right now. I'm grateful the Working Parents Benefit will go directly to families in my centre to help with the cost of child care.

Now, Madam Chair, we've reinvested tax dollars wisely. I would also say that we've provided – I mean, as the child care operator I just quoted said, we invested over \$110 million in provincial and federal funds throughout the pandemic to support child care operators. We did that responsibly. We gave them flexibility. We listened to child care, preschool, and out-of-care operators across the province. We let them tell us how best they could use those dollars to meet the demands, whether it was of their families or their early childhood educators, or to meet the demands put forward by the chief medical officer of health and the guidelines that these centres had to operate under. We gave them that flexibility, we made those investments, but, Madam Chair, we really wanted to invest these unspent dollars directly into the pockets of hard-working Alberta parents that needed it the most.

4:40

The Chair: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to the minister for her answers to my question. I really appreciated that. I will now cede the remainder of my time to a beautiful part of God's country, the Member for Calgary-East. Thank you so much.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-East, you have 50 seconds.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. The pandemic hit just over a year ago, and throughout that time our front-line workers have continued to work tirelessly to protect Albertans, keep our families and communities safe from harm, and provide care to those in need. After briefly closing last March, a small number of child care centres reopened so that they could continue to provide care for the children of essential workers. It's clear that not only is child care essential for our economy, it's essential for our society. Can the Minister of Children's Services please explain why she has requested \$7.7 million to be added to child care workers' support? Who is eligible for this support, and how many workers will be impacted?

The Chair: Hon. members, we will now move to the opposition's next 10 minutes. The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. Returning to some questions, then, for the Minister of Health. It says here that we have \$154 million set aside for increasing costs of existing COVID-19 pandemic initiatives, including testing, contact tracing, incremental staffing, and overtime. Through you to the Minister: are there any additional categories that are contained in that \$154 million? Could you give me a breakdown for how much of that \$154 million is in each category?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, Madam Chair, as we continue to very dynamically respond to the pandemic, the specific amounts for testing and contact tracing, the overtime, the incremental staffing

that will be required for those categories is going to depend in the next couple months as we continue to make sure that we are, as I said, dynamically and quickly responding to the pandemic. We do know that the \$154 million is what we expect for the year-end for these categories. I don't know if the member mentioned that there is also incremental staffing and overtime that's going to be included in that \$154 million on top of the testing and contact tracing.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. This does prove tricky then. Yes, indeed. The intent, of course, is for us to, I guess, vote on this spending on behalf of Albertans, but as with, I guess, the budget that we had for the Ministry of Health as well as with the COVID contingency plan, it proves difficult for us at times to do our work as the Official Opposition or to provide that transparency for Albertans if we are simply given a large category and Albertans are told that this is simply for COVID spending. I can appreciate that this is a dynamic field, but certainly I think there is some middle ground between simply presenting a grand total and saying that this is COVID stuff or necessarily being able to nail down precisely the exact amounts that are going to be spent.

There was some calculation, I'm sure, that went into coming up with this figure of \$154 million. There must be some level of estimate that has been made for each portion of this spending, what they anticipate it's going to be costing for the testing, for the contact tracing, for the overtime and staffing. I would just ask again if the minister could not at least provide some general ballpark based on the estimates that his own department and surely the Minister of Finance has looked at to determine these amounts.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, Madam Chair, the member makes it sound like \$154 million is the amount that is being requested through supplementary supply. That's not the case at all. It's \$323 million, the amount, together with \$170.8 million made available from lower than budgeted expense in other programs. That does provide \$197 and a half million dollars for the critical worker benefit. It does include the line item that the member mentions, that includes both testing and contact tracing as well as incremental staffing and overtime. It does as well include \$68 and a half million for operator funding for the licensed supportive living as well as home care and residential addiction and mental health treatment facilities to protect vulnerable Albertans and their staff as well as the home-care clients from COVID-19. It also does include \$13 million for comfort care aides, it includes \$8.2 million for vaccine distribution costs to the end of the year, and it includes \$4.5 million for program support costs, Madam Chair.

Very clearly, there are multiple categories that are included in the total amount for the ministry as we continue to respond to the pandemic because our focus, as we've said throughout the pandemic, is making a promise to Albertans that AHS and the ministry would have all the resources that they would need in responding to the pandemic, whether it was being able to provide the critical care that every Albertan needs on AHS's program delivery side or whether it's the vaccine deployment within the ministry, and that's making sure that we are getting vaccines in the arms of Albertans as quickly as we receive them from the federal government.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair, and, through you, thank you to the minister for reading what is already here on the page and evading the question that was actually put.

My understanding, then, is that the minister feels that it is not necessary to provide any further transparency to Albertans about the specific areas of spending that have been found here, and indeed that is also what we found in the budget with the contingency fund, and that is also what we find in that – we had the report which was supposed to be drafted to report on what the government had to learn from the first wave; here we are, past the second wave, potentially approaching a third, and that information is not yet available to Albertans. It is unfortunate that one year into this pandemic this government is providing so little clarity to Albertans about what it has actually done, the details of what it is actually spending, the details of what it has actually learned. I find this disappointing, and I certainly hope that we're going to see this improve because Albertans, frankly, as the shareholders who are funding this work on behalf of government, deserve far more transparency. I don't think this would be considered acceptable for the shareholders of a corporation to simply be told: there is this amount, and it's kind of going here.

I will move on, then, and ask – regarding the critical worker benefit in response to the COVID-19 pandemic we have here \$197 million, approximately, that's being set aside for that, I'm assuming, within the health care field. To the minister, then, through you, Madam Chair: can he identify how many health care workers this breaks down to that we'll be paying through this benefit, and can he just clarify – there's the amount of \$197 million, but the ministry's total funding is \$209 million. Is that just a difference, then, for EI, CPP, et cetera?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I've noticed a pattern definitely from the members opposite throughout the response to the pandemic and especially in the fall and even now again, as we return to the Legislature and we stand here in this room in the spring session. The only focus for the NDP is undermining confidence: undermining confidence in all of the amazing people who are working to respond to the pandemic, all the undermining of confidence in our health care system, all the undermining of confidence in our public health officials.

Let's remember that this is the Member of the Legislative Assembly in the fall, Madam Chair, who was questioning whether we were going to be running out of oxygen. This is the member who was undermining the confidence in the trace together app. This is the member who was misrepresenting the contingency plans in the renting of a tent and establishing a contingency plan in the Butterdome, and ever since then, including in estimates as well recently this week, when I was slandered and he was trying to claim, without foundation and completely falsely, that I or my office have ever intervened in any procurement decision by AHS – he spent a significant portion, I believe, in estimates wasting his time, trying to make this claim without foundation, falsely, when neither I or my office have ever intervened in any procurement decision of AHS's since we've come into government.

But that doesn't matter to the member, Madam Chair. He's not going to stick to the truth. He's going to continue this behaviour of undermining public confidence in our vaccine distribution, in our response to the pandemic, and all the amazing work that folks in the ministry and AHS are doing to make sure that the care that people need is going to be there for them.

Now, the specific question that he had about the critical care benefit I would have to defer to my colleague the hon. Minister of

Labour and Immigration. Is that right, if I defer that question to you?

4:50

The Chair: We'll go back to the member, and he can direct the question.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre, you have 40 seconds.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate that the minister had the opportunity, I guess, to get a few things off his chest that apparently had been bothering him for some time. It's unfortunate that he could not again actually provide the information for the people of Alberta, the actual transparency that people would expect to see from a minister of the Crown, a simple answer to a simple question, but that is the prerogative of the minister and indeed is one that he has chosen to demonstrate time and again.

However, if the minister of labour could perhaps provide the answer to the question regarding the critical worker benefit, I would certainly welcome that information.

The Chair: We'll now move on to the next 10-minute block for the government caucus members. I see the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Mr. Rowswell: Sorry. She was going to answer the question from the last . . .

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you, Madam Chair. Am I able to answer the question from the . . .

Mr. Bilous: There's got to be a question first.

The Chair: No. Sorry. We have to go to the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Mr. Rowswell: Sorry. I was pleased to see a request for \$68.5 million towards operator funding for licensed supportive living, home care, residential and mental health treatment facilities. Our government has done so much to protect this sector. I know that my constituency has been a significant benefactor of that, and some of our facilities have come from the brink of being closed to operating fully. I'm glad to see that these supports are going to be continued. We know how important these services are to Albertans who live in these facilities and their families as well as those who are cared for at home, so I'm curious how the Ministry of Health is approaching the applications for this funding. How will the Minister of Health be distributing the funds, and what are the requirements to receive this funding?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. Government is, as the member pointed out, providing 68 and a half million dollars to protect those who are vulnerable in the province as well as staff in continuing care and residential addiction and mental health treatment facilities as well as home-care clients from the pandemic and the spread of COVID-19 in our communities. This one-time funding will support operators of noncontracted licensed supportive living and both contracted and noncontracted home care as well as hospices and residential addiction and mental health treatment centres. It will help operators to pay for increased staffing, additional cleaning supplies, and personal protective equipment.

Funding to support operators providing essential services is going to vary by sector and will be calculated based on the number

of spaces in each facility or on an hourly basis for home care. It will be \$48 million in noncontracted licensed supportive living, \$9.9 million for residential addiction and mental health treatment facilities, and \$9.6 million for home care as well as another \$1 million for residential community hospice.

Now, organizations operating during the period of March 15, 2020, to March 31, 2021, are eligible. The application process began on the 22nd of February and will be available up until March 31, Madam Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Mr. Rowswell: I'd like to cede my time to the Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Glasgo: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. My question will be to the Minister of Health. I'm happy to hear that nearly a million rapid tests are being distributed to help protect workers and vulnerable Albertans and to hear about the new pilot program offered to students to assess rapid on-site testing. COVID-19 has hit Alberta hard, and it's comforting to know that the Ministry of Health and all front-line workers are working on making this fight a little bit easier. With the cost of testing, contact tracing, implemental staffing, and the overtime that comes with fighting COVID-19, my question is: how is the Ministry of Health currently working to get Albertans the service that they need, and how is the ministry going to ensure that the additional \$154 million requested on page 26 of the supplemental supply document will be distributed appropriately and used responsibly?

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Chair. The \$154 million, as I also said to Edmonton-City Centre in his questions, is for – and I think the member pointed this out – testing, contact tracing as well as the incremental staffing, overtime costs. We're going to remain committed to ensuring that the health system has the resources that it needs to continue to fight the pandemic while protecting lives by keeping Albertans safe, keeping them healthy. Alberta has responded swiftly and effectively to address the pressures on the health care system that are associated with the pandemic, and this work will continue. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to remain a significant driver of government activity and government spending, and we anticipate having to respond to and support the ongoing work that's related to the pandemic through the balance of fiscal '20-21 – that is, 2020-21 – and well into the fiscal year of '21-22.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Glasgo: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to cede my time to the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

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

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Madam Chair. My question relates to education. Providing support for our education workers is important in these times especially. However, so is ensuring that students have all the supports they need. I see on line item 3.2, learning support funding, on page 19 of the supplementary supply documents that the ministry is allocating almost \$40 million of the requested

funding. The learning support funding is generally used for grants and programs to support students, so my question to the Minister of Education is: how will this funding be used to support our students and staff, and how does this relate to the funds requested for the critical worker benefit?

Thank you.

Member LaGrange: Thank you very much for that question. Madam Chair, I am very pleased to be requesting an additional \$43.2 million to support Education's portion of the critical worker benefit program for education system employees. This includes an investment of \$10.8 million from Alberta's government to support low-wage critical workers. In Alberta's education system this means that eligible individuals from the following professions will receive this financial support in recognition of their hard work during these very unprecedented times. Receiving the support will be education assistants, including library assistants, language assistants, therapeutic SLP assistants, lab technicians and assistants, CTS aides and assistants, academy assistants. We will also be providing that support to bus drivers, including bus attendants; to custodians, including caretakers and janitors; and to school secretarial staff, including school office assistants and office support workers.

To be eligible for the benefit, all positions must meet these criteria: eligible education workers cannot be a certificated teacher or a noncertificated learning instructor or leader; eligible education workers must be considered low wage in the education sector; eligible education workers must have worked a minimum of 300 paid hours for a provincial school authority or a contractor with a provincial school authority between October 12, 2020, and January 31, 2021. In most cases these paid hours were pro-rated to reflect when schools were required to be closed during that time frame.

Education's component of this program is focused on lower wage workers who continue to work on the front line and provide support in delivering critical services to Albertans. Thousands of education workers who helped to deliver critical services to Alberta's students during the pandemic are being recognized with a one-time payment of \$1,200. Alberta is providing the benefit to the broadest group of education workers of any province while it appears that some provinces have excluded this group entirely. I'm so proud of the fact that our province did not exclude them. This school year is possible thanks to the hard work of thousands of dedicated education workers. From the bottom of my heart and, I know, from everyone here: we really want to thank all of those workers and express our sincere gratitude.

Thank you.

5:00

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

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Madam Chair. If I may, I'd like to cede the floor to the very capable MLA for Livingstone-Macleod.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod. You have one minute.

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Madam Chair. Parental choice and choice in education is something that this government and this Education minister have gone to great lengths to protect. Even during these times of crisis it is integral that these decisions and the students receiving education through different types of schools remain supported. Referring to page 19 of supplementary supply, items 4.1 and 4.2, accredited private schools support and accredited private early childhood service operators support, they will receive \$1.9 million and \$1.8 million of their requested funding respectively. Can the Minister of Education please explain how these amounts

were determined and how this funding will help these students and staff?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Education, with 25 seconds.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. Alberta's education system has a number of delivery methods that have been very successful. We have a long tradition of success, which includes public, separate, charter, independent, francophone, and home education, that allows parents to select the method that they feel will best help their child reach their full potential.

I was proud to bring forward the Choice in Education Act, 2020. A strong public education . . .

The Chair: Hon. members, we will now move on to the next 10-minute block for members of the Official Opposition. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. First off, I would like to go back to the Alberta jobs now program. A key piece of the government's agenda is the Alberta jobs now program through the ministry of labour. The program overlaps both the fiscal years 2020-21 and 2021-22. Before we approve any supplementary supply for this ministry, we have some questions about the Alberta jobs now program.

First, the government is requisitioning \$62 million as an appropriation for the Alberta jobs now program that has to be spent in the next 15 days. So far there's no program, and people can't apply. To the minister: what assurances can you give to this Assembly that you can actually spend the \$62 million in the next 15 days?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. As I explained in estimates last week – and I just wanted to provide some broad background to the Alberta jobs now program – this is a program that we are looking forward to announcing in the very near future. It's a program that's just under \$200 million, spread over multiple years. The purpose of the program, really, is to get Albertans back to work and provide Albertans with the skills that they need to be able to get back into the workforce. We appreciate that the pandemic, as indicated by the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, has had a tremendous impact on our economy. Our government's approach is: how do we support Albertans and, from my ministry's perspective, how do we support Alberta workers in getting back into the workforce?

The Alberta jobs now program is just under \$200 million; \$185 million of those dollars are through federal funding. We decided and we made a conscious choice to hold off implementing this right away – this \$185 million was announced in December by the federal government – simply because we wanted to match these program dollars to our recovery, when we can put these dollars to the best and highest use. In addition, we were also in conversations and continue to be in conversations with the federal government concerning the final program design and the alignment of the program funding.

We've had very positive conversations with the federal government, and it's not only us, Madam Chair, having these conversations; it's a number of other provinces that have also gone to the federal government in terms of looking for additional flexibility. The conversations have gone well to date, and we are hopeful of making an announcement.

Once we get the announcement out the door, which will be coming in the very near future, then we'll be able to provide more details concerning the program, which, as indicated during

estimates, is an employer-based program but will actually focus on those who are unemployed right now and help them get back to work, and then we can actually flow the dollars. As indicated, \$62 million is allocated for this year, and a further \$120 million in grants is indicated in our estimate for next year's budget.

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

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. My understanding is that we were going back and forth, but if the minister would like to eat the time up, I can just ask a whole bunch of questions at once and use my five minutes.

The question that I was asking is: how is this money going to be spent? We have 15 days left. My question is: how is this money going to be spent in the next 15 days? I haven't heard an answer to that question. I appreciate that employment is a huge issue for many Albertans, but again: 15 days. This money can't be carried over, and if the expectation is that this money is being carried over, then I think we need to be hearing, honestly, in the opposition that that is what the plan is with this money.

In addition, I'd like to know: with such a huge investment of \$62 million, what are the targeted employers and what are the targeted job opportunities within this mandate? I've been hearing from many rural Albertans that there is a huge lack of ability to hire in agricultural sectors. They're not able to recruit individuals to come out and work. We have a very concerning trend happening in our veterinarian sector, where we don't have enough veterinarians in our province right now that are able to support our rural agricultural sectors. My question again is: what are the targets for the \$62 million? What employers are you recruiting to help train?

At the same time, if we're recognizing through this budget a \$62 million investment in job creation, why would there be such a substantial cut to postsecondary institutions that could be offering this training such as NAIT, SAIT, all of those very career- and trade-oriented areas? A \$62 million investment could go a long way to getting people into those trade positions, getting their skills upgraded, and being able to return to the workforce. Again, if the minister could maybe briefly respond, let me know how you're spending it in 15 days, why it isn't going to postsecondary institutions, and if not, what are the employers and employees that you're looking at targeting?

The Chair: The hon. the Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Well, thank you very much, Madam Chair. In regard to the program, again, we're looking forward to releasing the details of this in the very near future. I can share that it is going to be targeted at employers, to support them not only to create demand but also to be able to train Albertans and provide training and retraining for them so they can actually get back to work and facilitate moving, where required, from a sector basis. It is going to be broad based. As I mentioned during estimates, the design is different than the Canada-Alberta job grant, but it also is going to include for-profit and not-for-profit organizations being able to use this, and it will be able to be used both within the cities and for employers in rural Alberta. This is a broad-based program, and we're looking very much forward to being able to launch that in the very near future.

I'd like to share that this is also in addition to standard programming that my department offers in terms of skills training. I already mentioned earlier the Canada-Alberta job grant, which is an employer-based funding program, but we also provide funding directly to Albertans to support them during the training. We also provide funding to institutions. For example, our training for work program provides funding to enable Albertans who are unemployed

to take that training free of charge, and the organizations – and this is done on an RFP basis – that apply for funding under this will use our postsecondary educators, including SAIT and the University of Calgary, to deliver some of the training. The beauty of this particular type of programming is that over 70 per cent of people who go through this program either have to find a job or go to additional education or they don't actually receive the benefits.

This funding, this Alberta jobs now program, is a way that we can meet this very broad-based, employer-based, increased demand for Albertans while at the same time getting Albertans the skills that they need to get the job, and we're looking forward to making this announcement in the near future.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you again, Madam Chair. I still don't understand. I haven't heard from the minister where this money is actually going to go. What we know is that \$62 million has to be spent before March 31. It cannot be carried over. To ask the Assembly to support an appropriation of \$62 million without an actual, clear plan of what's going to happen in the next two weeks – are their FTEs, are there areas that you're targeting, and are there employers that you're already having conversations with and working with? What is the plan for the \$62 million? I do appreciate that there are other programs in income support. I was a social worker. I referred many people to those programs. There is something specific about the jobs now program that is different than those programs.

5:10

My question, again, is: how are you spending that money in the next two weeks? Who is it targeting? Again, I've given some opportunity here and suggestions like supporting our ag industry and recruiting and retraining people. I've talked about the veterinarian area and the fact that we don't have enough vets. So my question is: are you looking at oil and gas? Are you looking at the IT sector? Where is this money going to go, and how are people going to be able to access it and be employed on April 1?

Mr. Copping: Thanks again for the question. As I indicated in my previous answer – and maybe I'll be more specific – this is going to be available to all sectors. It's not sector specific. This is going to be not too dissimilar to the Canada-Alberta job grant. It's a different design but broader in terms of its application, in terms of being able to support employers across the sectors – we are not picking particular sectors – across all sectors where there's an opportunity for jobs to get unemployed Albertans back to work.

I can say – and this is the conversation that we had during estimates – that, you know, some of the money that's already been identified goes to administration in terms of Alberta jobs now people hired to be able to run this program once we get it announced, and people are ready to move forward on that basis.

In addition, we've also worked with Service Alberta and invested in developing a portal that employers can access to make application for this program. Again, I'm looking forward to announcing this.

The Chair: Hon. members, we will now move on to the government caucus members. The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. When Alberta exits the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges will still exist for many of our workers. A key program that the province introduced was the Alberta jobs now program in partnership with the federal government. This program will provide opportunities for Albertans to train and retrain

themselves and create a more productive and dynamic workforce. Can the minister of labour give some additional details as to how this program was designed such that it could benefit the greatest number of Alberta employers and employees as possible?

Mr. Copping: Well, thank you very much to the hon. member for the question in regard to Alberta jobs now. As I indicated to a member earlier in speaking to the program, this program is a just under \$200 million program that will be delivered over multiple years. Really, our focus is on reducing the cost for employers to employ Albertans and then for employees to get the skills that they need to get a job and get back to work.

This program leverages the funding from the federal government. An announcement of \$185 million was made in December of last year. We're going to be leveraging that through the program. The provincial government is also going to be putting money in, from an administration standpoint, to be able to move this program forward.

That program is really designed to facilitate broad access for employers and the industry and to be used by employers of all sizes from private sectors in all regions of the province, including not-for-profit organizations. You know, I'm looking forward to announcing more details in very short order as we work through issues with the federal government before we announce this and, quite frankly, as we exit, come out of, the second wave. I'm very pleased with the tremendous work that has been done by our colleague the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation.

But as our economy starts to move forward and we're having an uptick in jobs – again, the most recent jobs report was very optimistic, and it was very promising in terms of: we're continuing to add jobs to the economy. Now is a good time to be able to use this funding in the most effective way possible to get Albertans back to work and to support employers in ensuring that they can hire Albertans as we get through the pandemic and then we start with our recovery.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for answering.

With that, Madam Chair, I will turn it over to the MLA for Airdrie-Cochrane.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Cochrane.

Mr. Guthrie: Thank you, Madam Chair. The COVID-19 pandemic was acutely felt in Alberta, already struggling with high unemployment and underemployment. The pandemic struck at the worst possible time. By implementing the critical worker benefit, the government of Alberta supported workers who could not safely work from home and ensured that as much money as possible was delivered to the greatest number of people. One of the unique features of this program was that it was delivered via the employer and not by government. Can the Minister of Labour and Immigration explain why this program was delivered in this way, and were there efficiencies as a result of the employer delivering it?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you so much to the hon. member for the question. We put in a great deal of thought in terms of how we were going to deliver this program, and we recognize that this program, that's going to put \$1,200 into the pockets of over 300,000 Albertans – we put a great deal of thought into this program with multiple delivery mechanisms. The reason why we chose a more complicated way to do this as opposed to simply through a single government program is that the cost associated with administering it – we were mindful of that, and we

want to get as many dollars into the pockets of Albertans as possible, so we chose to deliver this through multiple departments. My colleagues the Minister of Health, the Minister of Children's Service, the Minister of Education, the Minister of Community and Social Services, through their departments, are delivering this to thousands of workers directly.

This is for employees who came forward as part of the response to providing services of the pandemic. These are our health care workers, our nurses, our front-line health care workers in acute care, who came to work, particularly during the second wave, that we had over Christmas, of the pandemic, in some very challenging times and gave it their all to be able to support Albertans. This delivery mechanism, through Alberta Health Services and through the Department of Health, can provide that to them, and that includes, you know, long-term care facilities as well. Then we take a look at Community and Social Services, again, those front-line workers providing assistance to those in congregate care with disabilities, for example, and dealing with those who are homeless; Children's Services, again, workers providing care to children, recognizing the work that they've done; and the same within Education.

Through each one of these departments they were able to identify the organizations directly and then provide, flow that money to those organizations, who can then make the payment directly to the employees who have the information. We thank the departments because this is going to be done at a very low cost and very efficiently, and we thank all the employers and the organizations that work with these departments to provide these services for doing that. It's a very efficient way to drive this program.

In addition, then, when we took a look at – you know, for the private sector, because we didn't have agreements in place with private-sector employers, we need to put in an application process. Again, we worked very hard with Service Alberta to try to put in a system whereby it could be done online, it could be done via the current, existing platform that Service Alberta has and be done efficiently so it'll make it easier for employers to put in an application. In addition, we made some tweaks as well, because we got some feedback saying that it was challenging to do one by one, so they could upload multiple employees for, like, larger employers such as grocery stores and be able to provide that functionality through the website. Then we can quickly verify that and make the payments.

I think our overall approach to this, sort of delivering the funds through other departments who have agreements in place with all of these, sort of limits our costs and makes it more efficient. Plus, going through employers is generally, again, very efficient as opposed to individual employees applying because there's a lot more administration to be able to do that on that basis. Lastly, even for when we do need an application format, by doing it on an employer basis and then having a very efficient web-based application, we can drive efficiencies. Really, at the end of the day, why are we doing this? It's all about doing it efficiently, saving costs so that we can put the most amount of money of this benefit into the pockets of working Albertans who are eligible.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Guthrie: Through the chair, thank you, Minister.

Madam Chair, I would like to cede my time to the Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

5:20

The Chair: The Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Ms Rosin: Thank you, Madam Chair. Well, as we know, the Ministry of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women works

hard to improve Albertans' quality of life through cultural programming, historic preservation, and sport. We also know that through COVID-19 some of the shortfalls in revenue in the culture sector have been the hardest hit across multiple sectors, multiple industries. I know that our minister has been working very hard to support Albertans and especially those in the culture and the sport sectors over the past year. We did make a commitment to ensure that every Albertan can enjoy that great quality of life, that they can continue partaking in these cultural events, these street fairs, these sport games going into the future. I see that on page 14 of our supplementary supply it mentions that \$14.7 million has been allocated for the sport and cultural event relaunch program. I'm just wondering if the Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women can elaborate on the importance of this relaunch program and how these funds are being spent to benefit all Albertans.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women in 38 seconds.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you, Madam Chair. These dollars are allocated specifically to make sure that this sector stays alive and that they are ready to relaunch as soon as possible. I can't wait for us to get back to life. This sector is ready to go, so we wanted to make sure that they had what they need to bridge them until that happens.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Ms Rosin: Thank you, Madam Chair. With probably about five seconds left, I would have ceded my time to the MLA for Calgary-Fish Creek, but he can start the next round.

The Chair: Great idea.

We will now move on to members of the Official Opposition for their 10-minute block. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. First off, I'd just like to ask the Minister of Finance if he can please confirm that if the \$62 million is not spent by the end of this month, it has to go back into general revenue.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. Certainly, the member opposite has identified the typical path for amounts that are left unspent at the end of a budget year.

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

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Madam Chair. To the minister of labour: can he a hundred per cent confirm that by the end of this month, by April 1, all of this money will be spent for the launch of this program?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Well, thank you very much, Madam Chair. You know, we put \$62 million into the budget, and we are looking forward to announcing this program in the very near future and moving forward from that basis.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I think we're confused here. The \$62 million I'm speaking about is the appropriation fund, which is for the next two weeks. I guess my question to the minister would be: why wasn't that \$62 million just projected in the

upcoming budget instead of being asked through supplementary supply, knowing that it has to go back to general revenue in two weeks?

Mr. Copping: This was the estimate that was put in at the time when we were looking at the program, when the budget numbers were put in place. Again, we're looking at launching this program in the very near future and moving forward on that basis.

Ms Sweet: Okay. I'm just going to confirm one more time, and then I'm going to actually pass it over to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview. To the minister of labour: as of right now you cannot guarantee that that \$62 million will be spent by the end of the month.

Mr. Copping: As I indicated previously to the hon. member, we're looking into launching this program in the very near future and moving forward on that basis.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you. I do appreciate the back and forth with the minister, so I'll thank him for that. My confusion is around – sup supply is being debated today. It's being asked for. For every other ministry those dollars are needed for them to get through to March 31, for the remaining two weeks of the month. As of April 1, presumably the budget will be passed. Obviously, it's up to the Assembly to vote it through, but that's when the new budget takes over. The confusion, I think, for me and for us is that if there's a \$61 million ask here for the jobs now program – and I appreciate that the minister is working on it; details to come – how can the minister possibly spend \$61 million in the next 14 days? If the minister doesn't, that money cannot be carried over. We're not talking about the federal amount. I appreciate that the government of Alberta is asking the feds for an extension on the program. That's great. But the \$61 million cannot be extended because the Assembly is granting permission through this debate right now, today, for the next two weeks. Can the minister, I guess, then clarify – this \$61 million will not be spent over the next two weeks. Can the minister confirm or deny that, please?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Again, as stated, this was the money that was put into the budget. We're looking forward to making the announcement, and then we'll move forward from that point in time.

Thank you.

Mr. Bilous: I guess my question, then, is to the Minister of Treasury Board and Finance. If the program is not ready and the money can't go out the door before this went to print, before this debate today, because it's a sup supply bill, why was that \$61 million not pulled out? The minister has just admitted that the program is not ready, the money will not be spent.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. The expectation is that the minister will be announcing the rollout of the program very shortly, and the expectation is that that program will roll out before year-end and the funding that we're approving in this supplementary supply bill will in fact fund that program.

Mr. Bilous: Okay. I appreciate the answer by the minister, but I guess my frustration and probably Albertans' frustration is that

we've been debating a line item that shouldn't even be in the sup supply bill. We've wasted an hour trying to identify how this money will be spent in two weeks, and now we finally have the answer that it won't in fact be spent in the next two weeks. I appreciate that the government is working on a program. The program is not ready. The money comes with a timeline, right? It's ticking down. So if it's not being spent – I appreciate the government being forthcoming with their answers.

I'd like to move on to ask about other line items that, hopefully, will in fact be deployed in the next two weeks. I'd like to go back to the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation if I could. Minister, if we can jump back to the relaunch grant, which is the bulk of the minister's funding in this sup supply bill, I'm just curious to know if the minister performed any kind of analysis on the CECRA program. You know, are businesses requiring additional support, and are they asking for additional support? In some situations landlords did not sign up for that program, and I'm curious to know if the government has the number of businesses that were evicted because the commercial eviction ban was not extended.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I want to get up and just respond to the assertion that the member opposite made. Our expectation is that the jobs now program will be announced before year-end and rolled out. That is our expectation. We're not signalling anything different today, and I think it's important that everybody in this House understands that. Here's the reality. Businesses and unemployed Albertans need the program rolled out as quickly as the minister is able to get agreement with the federal government, and that is why we've pushed this program. That's why we've included it in this budget year, because we believe it is still possible and doable. Our expectation is that the minister will be able to roll this program out before the year-end. That's why the line item is in this appropriation bill, and that is our expectation.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Madam Chair. My question, then, Minister, is – if it's in here and the expectation is for the minister to roll it out, then I find it really difficult to believe, because the minister has been asked a number of times: which employers are going to receive it? How is it going to be rolled out? What are the metrics for this program? Having been in government, I know that programs cannot be stood up in a matter of two weeks and rolled out. I mean, ask the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation. He announced a program that is taking six weeks to be developed before the money goes out the door. If this program has been developed, then my question to the government is: please provide this Assembly with how it is being rolled out, which employers will qualify, what the program credentials are, what the metrics are, and how this money will in fact get to Alberta workers 14 days from now.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

5:30

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. My colleague the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance may want to comment after me, but as I already indicated, we have developed this program. It is for use by employers across the province, both private-sector employers and not-for-profits. On this program we've developed, we worked with Service Alberta in terms of putting the portal in place and are, quite frankly, ready to roll it out.

We look forward to rolling it out in the very near future. We're just finalizing discussions with the federal government.

But I'd also like to ask if my colleague the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance has anything more to add.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Bilous: Yes. Thank you, Minister. It sounds, then, like the program may in fact be designed, that you are waiting for the federal government although I don't know why that answer couldn't come from the government. But my question to the minister is this. You're telling the Assembly that you can evaluate applications and get dollars out the door, \$61 million, in less than two weeks – it still hasn't been announced yet – but the Minister of Jobs, Innovation and Economy has stated that the processing time for his relaunch grant is 10 days, and that's record speed. So how is it possible that you can get \$61 million out the door by March 31, in 11 business days?

The Chair: The hon. minister in nine seconds.

Mr. Copping: As I indicated previously, we expect to make this announcement in the very near future, and as indicated by the . . .

The Chair: Hon. members, we will now move on to government members for the next 10-minute block. The hon. member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair. Art is very much valued in Alberta, across this great province, and artists' work enriches our lives, promotes creativity and innovation, and contributes to a more diversified economy. When arts – and that includes our performance arts – thrive, Alberta is a better place to live, invest, and do business. Many artists, in fact most of them, have lost audiences and income because of the COVID-19 pandemic. On page 15, under Operating Expense, line item 2, community and voluntary support services, and line item 2.3, community initiatives program, it outlines the total additional funding that was invested to support the stabilize programs. Can the Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women comment on how much of the total supplementary budget will go towards supporting artists? What will the stabilize program do to invest in live-experience organizations so that they can resume in-person, live events as we emerge from the pandemic?

Thank you.

The Chair: The Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women.

Mrs. Aheer: Can I have more than 15 seconds?

The Chair: You have nine minutes.

Mrs. Aheer: Okay. Good. Thank you very much for the question. As I've said before, the live experience is critical to our quality of life and also to the economic recovery. We have some of the latest statistics from Canada, and the data shows that the sector contributed over \$662 million to our province and the GDP and supports well over 14,000 jobs.

We've been really concerned about the sector's viability, as much as they have been, and as it continues to lose revenue, they still incur a lot of fixed costs. Funding priority in these applications is being given to the ones in the greatest financial need and, of course, with the exhaustion of other financial supports at this time.

There's also a risk of capital loss, and this is what I was talking about earlier should those venues be unable to reopen. Alberta's government, meaning the Alberta taxpayer, has invested heavily in

these cultural facilities over the years, and like I'd said earlier, they've been sitting idle for a year now, many of them. If they're unable to reopen, not only is this going to represent a significant investment loss, but it will be a terrible loss to the well-being of the people in this province. So that's why this particular tranche of money is focused on organizations that own or operate their venues, to ensure that they're maintained and protected, especially for Alberta's cultural identity and for tourism.

The stabilize program provides ample time for organizations to plan ahead, including their applications. In terms of some of the questions that have been asked about dollars spent, the accruals have to be done by March 31. The rollout of dollars is significantly different. Our accruals are done by March 31, and then the programs roll out as needed after that. That's normally how it works in a budget. That's certainly how it works in mine, in supplementary supply. As far as that goes, we've been working with them to come up with some creative and innovative strategies, especially to safely resume events.

I was so happy to see that in phase 2 we were able to do some live streaming on stages, bring musicians, bands, cohorts, and bubbles back together. As we know, a ballet doesn't just happen overnight; it is 10 months, sometimes a year of practice. Figure skaters will practise together for years before their programs are ready to be competitive. We have, you know, Erica Wiebe, who is the ambassador for sport in this province. She just doesn't become a champion at what she does; it takes years of practice and time. An opera does not just come together. Musical theatre stages and scenes don't just pop out of nowhere. There are years of practice and time and energy that go into these programs and the venues that support them, so we're going to make sure that they have the time to do that. We're hoping that there's at least some runway for them to be able to put these programs together so we can relaunch and restart and get back to life as soon as possible.

Also, I really want to give a shout-out to the sector. Their work in helping us to understand how to return in person safely has been outstanding. In the sports sector we had a return to play document that came from the provincial sports organizations but also from some of the smaller organizations. It was just fantastic, and I know that in the work that we've been doing with the Minister of Health and AHS, we've been really, really grateful for those conversations.

Also – and this is something that I say all the time – when we talk about the workplace, one person's workplace is in a cubicle and at a desk; another person's workplace is on a stage or on a soccer field. It's just a matter of understanding within the protocols of how it is that we get these folks back into their workplaces and back to work as soon as possible.

The applicants that own or operate a live-experience venue have to be able to show that they can open in 2021, of course given protocols, and the applicants must also show how they're reducing expenditures and changing their business models to adapt to the challenges of the pandemic and the economic downturn. This actually came after a lot of consultation, because all of us are in the same boat. We are in the same situation. This is not just something that is an Alberta situation; this is a global pandemic. Many of these stages are reliant on the borders being able to open to be able to bring in acts from other places in the world, so it is dependent upon federal government protocols, vaccinations . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt, but according to Standing Order 59.02(1)(c) you are actually limited to five minutes of the 10-minute speaking block. I didn't think you'd make nine.

We will now go to the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister. I just wanted to comment that, obviously, we have ahead of us events like our wonderful Calgary Stampede. I happen to be a bit of a folkie, and my wife and I usually do a stay-cation for the Folk Fest and, of course, watching the beautiful skies light up with pyromusical entertainment. All of these things are very much a part, so thank you for that.

Madam Chair, I'd like to cede the rest of my time to the Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

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

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Chair. Many Albertan families rely on child care so that they are able to go to work or to attend school, and the child care programs that they rely on have, like all Albertans, faced additional pressures, financial and otherwise, this year. Throughout the pandemic child care programs have gone above and beyond to ensure that programs are safe for their children and meet or exceed the public health guidelines. I'd like to express my thanks to the Minister of Children's Services and her staff for the work that they did to allow many of our child care facilities in Livingstone-Macleod to open early in the spring to allow our first responders and our front-line workers to return to work and serve the public. Thank you for that.

I want to talk about a line in supplementary supply for Children's Services that says that \$11.4 million has been requested for child care grants. I can also see that this funding is related to the 2019-2020 federal bilateral agreement. To the Minister of Children's Services: can you please explain what the distribution of this funding will look like, and can you please identify any other supports that have been provided to child care programs throughout the pandemic?

The Chair: The Minister of Children's Services.

5:40

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for the question. Speaking specifically about the \$11.4 million that was added to child care subsidy supports, this was the return of 2019-20 federal bilateral unused funding. That was the \$25-a-day centres that were operating in a select number of centres across the province. These centres were not able, just due to the pandemic and the challenges that centres and parents were facing and the unprecedented circumstances we were in, to spend these dollars in a way that met the needs of the bilateral agreement as it was signed.

We did ask those centres to return the unspent dollars to the ministry so that we could share that equitably with centres right across the province, not just in a select few. We know that centres right across the province were struggling during the pandemic. I often do talk about both the federal and provincial dollars that went to support child care and preschool and out of school operators right across the province at this time. Specifically, that \$11.4 million enabled us to reach out. We reached out to the child care working group. We asked them: as a government that does not want to choose winners and losers or support only a select number of centres, how can we best invest these dollars to make sure that operators, whether preschool, out of school care, or licensed child care centres, can meet their demands? That's where programs received a lump-sum payment of \$1,500 per program but then also a \$50 per licensed or contracted space grant. What that did was, really, level out the playing field between smaller centres and larger centres by addressing both a per-space and a per-program amount.

I would also just like to speak to the question . . .

The Chair: Hon. members, we will now move on to the final nine-minute block for members of the Official Opposition. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I ran out of time in my last block. I'd like to go back to the minister of labour. Again, sir, you've got 11 business days to get \$62 million out the door for the jobs now program. The program has not been announced, and there's no portal. I appreciate that the minister had said that Service Alberta has been working on a portal. The point is that there are 11 days to get \$62 million out the door. We've heard from the jobs minister that the relaunch grant had a record processing time of 10 days. I'd like to ask the minister for some specifics. How will he get the \$62 million out the door in the next 11 business days?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Madam Chair, and again thanks to the hon. member for the question. As I said, the portal has been developed. We are ready to go. We are waiting to finalize with the federal government, and we're looking forward to making an announcement in the very near future and then moving forward. We've allocated, as indicated by the Minister of Finance, \$62 million this year, and we're looking forward to making an announcement very soon.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Madam Chair. According to page 85 of the fiscal plan that was just tabled, Ottawa will only allow the government of Alberta to reprofile 20 per cent of the funds that go toward the Alberta jobs now program. The government is already asking Ottawa to reprofile 66 per cent of the funds for '21-22, but this excludes the \$62 million to be spent this year, that we are debating today, that has an 11-business-days window to be spent. If there's a chance that the government doesn't get these funds out the door, the government of Alberta will be leaving Ottawa's dollars on the table. My question, again, is to the minister. Eleven days to stand up a program, evaluate applications, and get the money out the door: how is that possible?

Mr. Copping: As previously indicated, we are in ongoing conversations with the federal government in regard to additional flexibility in terms of using the \$185 million. We've had positive conversations to date, and these are conversations that not only we are having with them but a number of other provinces, including Ontario and Manitoba, who have signed on in terms of these conversations. We've sent a letter, had positive conversations. We expect to hear back from the federal government in the very near future, and quite frankly we look forward to announcing the program at that point in time.

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

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd really appreciate it if I could know, like, how much time I have.

The Chair: Just under six minutes.

Mr. Deol: Under six minutes. Quite a bit. Thank you. My questions are to the Ministry of Children's Services. What I would like to probably do is to read all my questions, making sure that if we don't have enough time – I don't want to leave without having these questions on the record.

I'll start with my question number one. The government is requesting additional appropriation for your one-time child care

rebates, but this is not a long-term strategy to bring women back to the workforce. As the minister asks for this supplementary in-year funding, can the minister also share with this Legislature what her real plan is to get women back into the workforce? Can she share with this House why women aren't really mentioned in the government recovery plan? It's been troubling to understand this government's priorities. We are facing a crisis in the economy, and every credible expert out there is noting how important real child care is to get women back into the workforce.

In this request for supplementary supply we don't see any doable plan. It's like women are being forgotten. I would like to ask the minister, through you, Madam Chair, about the government's plan for child care. Let's say that this Legislature approves these funds. What is next? Why are we being simultaneously asked to pay \$30 million for a failing war room while telling women, our health, the population that they aren't a priority?

Another question. Page 10 of the supplementary supply: \$11.5 million is requested for child care rebates to parents. I assume this is for the working parent benefit that was announced last month, which the government indicated totalled \$108 million. The minister stated that this \$108 million was entirely from unspent dollars for child care subsidies in Budget 2020. If the benefit was funded entirely from the child care services budget, why is \$11.5 million being requested? Is it because this \$11.5 million is from dollars transferred to the government of Alberta from the federal government? Is this from funding provided under the '20-21 bilateral funding agreement between Alberta and Canada?

The \$7.7 million for child care worker support as part of the critical worker benefit reflects a portion of the \$23 million allocated for this benefit for Children's Services on page 105 of the fiscal plan. Does this mean the remaining portion of the critical worker benefit for child care workers and Children's Services workers was paid for out of the 2020 Children's Services budget? How much of the critical worker benefit was paid out of the ministry budget, and how much was new dollars?

Thank you, Madam Chair.

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. How many minutes do I have?

The Chair: One minute, 30 seconds.

Ms Schulz: One minute, 30 seconds. I will try to speak quickly. Those were actually excellent questions, and I do really appreciate those questions about a really important topic from the member opposite.

5:50

When it comes to the \$11.5 million, this was, in fact, as the member asked, added to the child care subsidy supports. It came out of child care worker supports. Again, that was to support the working parent benefit of \$108 million. This is because, again, we were underspent in that area for worker wage top-ups given the fact that child care operations are only at about – while we have over 95 per cent of centres open, we're only at just over 50, 55 per cent capacity. So we did have some unspent dollars, and, as I said earlier, we wanted to invest those right in the pockets of hard-working Alberta parents.

We absolutely know that a long-term plan is needed. That's why we do invest nearly \$400 million every single year to support child care and to support working parents. We're going to continue to look at data. What we are seeing is that parents' choices are shifting. We are seeing a shift. We know it's important as we come out of

the pandemic. We've said before that our government is focused on lives and livelihoods, because we want to get people back to work. I think we are seeing very positive signs in the economy, and our government will be there to support working parents who need the supports as we move forward. It's also important to note that as part of a long-term plan – sorry.

Vote on Supplementary Supply Estimates 2020-21, No. 2 General Revenue Fund

The Chair: Hon. members, pursuant to Government Motion 68 agreed to on March 11, 2021, the allotted time of three hours has now elapsed. I must now put the following question.

Those members in favour of the resolutions for the 2020-21 supplementary supply estimates, No. 2, general revenue fund, for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2021, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Chair: Any opposed, please say no. So carried.
Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Any opposed? Carried.

I will now invite the hon. Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation to move that the committee rise and report the 2020-21 supplementary supply estimates, No. 2, general revenue fund.

Mr. Schweitzer: Madam Chair, so moved.

[Motion carried]

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-East.

Mrs. Pitt: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again. The following resolutions relating to the 2020-21 supplementary supply estimates, No. 2, for the general revenue fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2021, have been approved.

Children's Services: expense, \$30,580,000.

Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women: expense, \$12,000,000.

Education: expense, \$43,200,000.

Energy: expense, \$274,800,000.

Health: expense, \$323,478,000.

Jobs, Economy and Innovation: expense, \$381,000,000; capital investment: \$200,000.

Labour and Immigration: expense, \$237,436,000; capital investment, \$550,000.

The Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report? All those in favour, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Speaker: Any opposed, please say no. In my opinion, the ayes have it. That motion is carried and so ordered.

Introduction of Bills

(reversion)

Bill 59

Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2021

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and the President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 59, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2021. This being a money bill, Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

Bill 59 will approve government to fund the outstanding costs related to fighting the pandemic and economic recovery. The supplementary estimates include \$1.3 billion in expense and \$750,000 in capital investment, mainly for the COVID-19 response and Alberta's recovery plan.

I ask all of my colleagues in the Legislative Assembly to support this bill to help the province fight the pandemic and mitigate its economic impacts.

Thank you.

The Speaker: I'm sorry. To the hon. Minister of Finance: I missed the opening of the statement. Did you say, "I so move" or "I request leave to move"?

Mr. Toews: I request leave to move.

The Speaker: Excellent.

[Motion carried; Bill 59 read a first time]

Mr. Schweitzer: Mr. Speaker, after a vigorous afternoon debate here, I think it's time for us to adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow. I so move.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the legislative policy committees will convene tonight and tomorrow morning for consideration of the main estimates. Tonight the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship will consider the estimates for the Ministry of Energy in the Rocky Mountain Room, and the Standing Committee on Families and Communities will consider the estimates for the Ministry of Service Alberta in the Grassland Room. Tomorrow morning the Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future will consider the estimates for the Ministry of Advanced Education in the Rocky Mountain Room, and the Standing Committee on Families and Communities will consider the estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing in the Grassland Room.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:56 p.m.]

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