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The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday evening, April 12, 2021

Day 95

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Monday, April 12, 2021

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, please be seated.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 56

Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021

[Debate adjourned April 8]

The Deputy Speaker: Any members wishing to join debate on Bill 56 in second reading? The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It's an honour to rise this evening to speak to Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. It's an important topic as we have discussions with municipalities across the province. Obviously, in my considerations and discussions and research on how the city of Edmonton has brought forward their concerns on what is effectively this bill and the cuts to municipalities through MSI funding, it's very clear that there's not a lot of support out there for the measures that this government is putting in place in terms of, effectively, as far as I know, a 25 per cent cut across the board to municipalities, especially in a time when we should be so focused on getting people back to work and supporting our local economies and we talk about supporting the health and well-being of all Albertans and how MSI funding contributes to that very important cause.

Once again, it's very concerning that this UCP government is going down and going in this direction. It's just a matter of fact, when we look at what's included in this and the discussions that have already taken place surrounding the proposal of MSI cuts and the proposal of Bill 56 in and outside of this Legislature, that Albertans and municipalities are frightened of how this might play out. Of course, when we look at MSI funding and the importance that it provides to Alberta communities – once again, if I look at the city of Edmonton and the concerns that they brought forward around their inability to support the chronically houseless in our community and the hopes that they had that this MSI funding would be an opportunity to support those people that are in our community and currently unhoused and currently looking and needing supports, especially in the middle of a pandemic, when we should be doing our best to house these families and these individuals, it's rather unfortunate that this is the direction that the UCP has taken.

We can look back to the decision that our government made, when we were in government, to come to the table with our major municipalities very early and consult and come forward with what we saw in the big-city charters and the funding that was going to be available there to our largest municipalities and the opportunities that were going to be in front of us, whether it be to house chronically homeless individuals, whether it be to support important infrastructure across our communities. For instance, in my own community of Edmonton-West Henday we have a recreation centre that has been proposed by the city of Edmonton, and with that funding from the big-city charters it would have been a very realistic possibility to see such an important facility move forward.

Now, I can appreciate that in the midst of a pandemic we need to consider how we are spending our money most effectively, but I

would pose that infrastructure builds and infrastructure investments like those that are proposed, whether it be the Lewis Farms rec centre or LRT projects across our province, whether it's in Edmonton or in Calgary, are vital projects for us right now, in the midst of this pandemic, to get people back to work. As we are seeing the job losses, as we are seeing unemployment, this government should be doing everything in their power to put Albertans back to work, and investments in that infrastructure are a very real opportunity to do that.

Unfortunately, while, when we brought the big-city charters forward in our time in government, the at the time Wildrose Party was willing to support that and said that it was an important initiative – during the election they stood up and they said that they would be supporting that same agreement – once again, when they came to power, when they came into government, they completely changed their tune. I've raised the point before, but I'll raise it again. When our big-city mayor, specifically in Calgary, saw that essentially this government was going back on that agreement that they campaigned on, that they supported when they were in opposition, he crumpled up the agreement and said that it wasn't worth the paper that it was written on, essentially.

That's how Alberta families are feeling right now, whether it's on this piece of legislation or the draft curriculum or any other piece of legislation that we're seeing come forward from this government. At the end of the day, the decisions that this government is making are not in the best interests of Albertans, are not doing the important work of supporting our communities at a time when they need it most. Madam Speaker, it's truly disappointing because this government had an opportunity to come in and meet Albertans in the middle, but what we've seen so far is the complete opposite. They're going back on agreements that they formally made, whether it be on the big-city charter, whether it be on the promise to index AISH for Albertans with disabilities in our community that find themselves unable to work. This government has completely done a one-eighty on many of the important decisions. Albertans, at the end of the day, voted for them because they made those commitments. It's absolutely unfortunate.

It's not just infrastructure investments like what we are hoping to see in the Lewis Farms rec centre; it spans across all municipal budgets, whether it be when our councillors are considering the budgets for policing, whether they're considering the budgets for supporting the chronically houseless, whether they're considering budgets for anything else, Madam Speaker. The failure to properly support them through Bill 56, the Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, the failure of this government to come up with a realistic plan for funding our communities, and the failure, at the end of the day, to support municipalities across this province are going to be felt by all Albertans.

Now, when we look at other decisions that this government has made, at the same time as they're telling municipalities that they're no longer going to fairly fund them, that they're going to go back on those decisions, we can see, in other areas of the provincial budget, in other areas and directions that this government has committed to or gone back on, increased fees across the board, essentially, whether it be the bracket creep that this Premier once campaigned against when he was with the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, complaining, rightfully so, that bracket creep is a danger to all Albertans, whether we look at the increased property taxes that are going to be faced by Albertans because of, once again, municipalities' inability to fund important and vital services in our community because of, for one, cuts to MSI funding by this provincial government. It is going to be increased, and it is going to place even greater burdens on Alberta families.

The list is not a short list, Madam Speaker. Whether we're looking at this government's unwillingness to support Albertans when it comes to insurance premiums, essentially letting the industry choose pretty much how legislation is written altogether at the end of day, whether we're talking about increases to parks and recreation fees, whether we're talking about increases to costs for seniors and, in many instances, having seniors' programs cut, whether it be dental programs, whether it be optometrist programs that were once in place, we see this government completely failing and rolling back many important services that were once available to Albertans and, in this instance, seniors. Those are completely disappearing or being cut, at the least. It's incredibly unfortunate.

The same goes for education taxes. When we were in government, I believe we made sure to do our best to freeze that, to hold the line, recognizing how important it was to support municipalities with that funding, how important it was to hold the line and ensure that Alberta families could, at least in that instance, not have to worry about increases in education taxes.

7:40

Here we are again, on top of all of the decisions that this government has made to cut funding for municipalities, whether it be for police specifically – we see that smaller communities or smaller municipalities across the province are going to be incredibly impacted by the decision of this government to take more of the money that is generated from things like tickets and traffic infractions. Once again this government is giving municipalities less and, at the same time, is expecting more from them and, at the same time even further, Madam Speaker, is saying that these municipalities essentially don't know how to spend their money properly, has come up with the idea of giving report cards to these municipalities to undermine their authority, to undermine the important privileges that have been put in place by those municipalities through elections, just like every one of the members here in this House, yet this government seems to not believe that they have the same authority or right to govern in the best interest of Albertans.

Now, once again, when we look through Bill 56, the Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, we see further that this government is going to force municipalities to pay for \$41 million in 911 upgrades. Of course, most Albertans if not all Albertans are paying a fee for having access to those services. They are important services, Madam Speaker, another file that this government is completely failing on when we look at code reds across this province, when we look at the movement to potentially centralize or change the way that these services are provided to Albertans. I know that members on the government side have been concerned with their own government in that respect, yet here we are, forcing municipalities and, at the end of the day, taxpayers to front the bill for these upgrades. But in the guise of this legislation they're trying to pass that buck on to municipalities and very clearly will come back and say: "It's the municipalities' problem. Oh, I don't know why they have to continue raising taxes." But here we are, and we see the very reasons for that in this legislation and many others across the board.

Now, I imagine that myself and many other MLAs will have legitimate questions to ask on this, and we're very hopeful that we'll get answers, Madam Speaker. I know that the ministers are always doing their best to answer our questions. One of the first ones that I would pose to the government is: have any of the ministers – hopefully, the Finance minister – tallied up the total amount of funding that they have cut or downloaded onto municipalities or ratepayers? Of course, when we look at opportunities, whether it be infrastructure investments, whether it be trying to bring new

businesses to Alberta, we're always concerned about the rate of return on those projects and on those investments, yet it seems very clear that this government is not concerned at looking at the compiling impacts or the combined impacts of the decisions that they're making. Hopefully, they can prove me wrong and let us know how much so far we've seen cut from the total amount of funding that they've downloaded onto municipalities. It's a very important question.

We've seen a lot of bills – I've laid out a few of them – or a lot of changes over the last couple of years from this UCP government that are being downloaded onto municipalities, onto ratepayers. I think it's important and prudent that this government brings those numbers forward to show Albertans the true cost of electing this government. I think it's a very important point to make. Even further, I would have to ask how the UCP government expects Albertans to afford paying higher property taxes. Once again, as the government cuts funding from municipalities, those cities are going to be forced to come up with that money. One of the few ways that they have to do that is by increasing property taxes, which I can only imagine is going to happen in many municipalities across the province.

Those are just a few of the questions I have, questions that I hope this government can answer as we continue the debate this evening on this piece of legislation, which is essentially this government going back on many of the promises that they made in opposition, during the election, and even more recently. It's very frustrating because I think of how this bill is going to impact Albertans and Edmontonians. I think about the opportunities that we had, whether through the work of EndPovertyEdmonton or other organizations, nonprofits in our community that are desperately trying to support Albertans and Edmontonians in a time when they are simply looking for any glimmer of hope on the horizon. Unfortunately, through Bill 56, as we've seen through many other pieces of legislation from this government, it doesn't seem to be there. It doesn't seem to be in the cards, Madam Speaker.

Now, when we look at the cuts in MSI – earlier I said 25 per cent. Just looking here further, it looks to be amounting to more like 36 per cent.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate on Bill 56 in second reading? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my privilege to stand tonight and speak to Bill 56, the local measures act. This legislation amends the local government fiscal framework act to align changes to the local government fiscal framework and the municipal sustainability initiative with Budget 2021. It also modernizes Alberta's 911 technology through amendments to the Emergency 911 Act.

The local measures act supports Budget 2021 by extending MSI funding to 2023-2024 to provide front-loaded and flexible capital funding for municipalities. As we've been saying following Budget 2021 and even long before, it's time to get this province's deficit under control through sustainable, responsible, and gradual processes. Budget 2021 directs record spending where it is most needed like to health and capital funding but also creates a road map to gradually cut back on programs like the municipal sustainability initiative, or MSI. The key word here is "gradual."

MSI funding has been crucial for Alberta communities through this pandemic. Lethbridge has benefited greatly from MSI funding, where we received just under \$25 million in 2020. To be specific, we were allocated just over \$20 million for MSI capital funding and

over \$600,000 in MSI operating funding. Projects like the renovation to the Lethbridge Airport and construction of a new fire hall in west Lethbridge as well as enhancement of the shooting sports facility and road and intersection upgrades were all made possible through MSI funding. This does not include additional special and targeted funding for Exhibition Park, the agrifood hub.

Budget 2021 sets a framework for Alberta living within its means. Bill 56 will reduce MSI funding by 25 per cent over the next three years to an average of \$722 million per year as Alberta lives within its means. It is important to note that this is a gradual process and not a sudden cut to this program. Vital projects that require funding through MSI will still be given the attention that they need. Over the next three years the MSI funding will be reflected as follows: \$1.196 billion in 2021-22, and then two years of \$485 million. Alberta's government provided \$500 million to municipalities under the municipal stimulus program in 2021 as part of Alberta's recovery plan, and much of that spending will be done in 2021 and the years following. As I said before, this has been vital to Lethbridge's development, and I firmly believe that the previous investment spending will make municipalities more sustainable and economically independent, which will also coincide and allow those projects to carry on over the next three years.

Madam Speaker, Bill 56 will also modernize and update the 911 system for the first time in nearly 30 years to ensure that Albertans continue to have safe, reliable services when they call or text 911 during an emergency. Texting 911 will offer a confidential and silent way of accessing emergency supports for those in sensitive situations where calling may not be an option. I do not want to imagine all the scenarios that this will be used in, but I am encouraged by the fact that many more Albertans will be able to access emergency services in situations where they could not before.

Additionally, this bill will update technology used by Alberta's 911 system. The federal government mandated through the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, the CRTC, that Canada's 911 system be upgraded to the next-generation 911 technology by March 30, 2024. Through the upgrades provided in Bill 56, next-generation 911 will improve location accuracy to calls to verify a caller's address or device location – this is vital in helping locate callers in rural and remote areas – and can also determine the height of the call, for example, in a taller building in a larger centre.

This technology will leverage the growth of broadband in areas underserved by cell coverage to make 911 calling much easier. Even in areas with poor cellphone coverage, if the area has broadband or Wi-Fi coverage the call will be processed through that network using this new technology. If contacting 911 via text or a PIN drop, user-initiated location sharing will not be required since the location will be provided automatically as long as the caller has some phone reception, which is done through satellite GPS.

7:50

Madam Speaker, the safety of Albertans is of utmost importance. Better, more reliable access to 911 services ensure the safety of Albertans in nearly every imaginable and unimaginable situation.

To cover the cost of the change, phone bills will see an increase of 51 cents per month on the 911 levy effective September 21, 2021. I do not take increasing costs on Albertans lightly, but I believe that this price is worth paying for the safety and betterment of our society. To be clear, Madam Speaker, these technology upgrades have nothing to do with EMS, policing, firefighters, or anything else related to first responders; 911 service will work better regardless of who answers the phone.

Bill 56, the Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, sets a clear direction to address responsible spending for municipal supports and gives us the opportunity to upgrade our critical 911 services and expand its efficacy. Given the commitment to Alberta's economic future and the safety of Albertans outlined in this legislation, I support this bill.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, any members wishing to join debate in second reading of Bill 56? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise tonight to speak to Bill 56, the Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. First, I would just like to follow my tradition of just giving a huge thank you to all of our first responders, all of our front-line workers, and all of those that are tirelessly working to ensure that we're safe from the pandemic that is happening globally.

Yeah. When we're talking about municipalities, this is literally something that impacts every corner of our province. Whether you live up north, in central, or in southern Alberta, this piece of legislation is going to impact your municipality's ability to meet your needs. What this bill proposes is likely going to be an increase to Albertans in terms of taxes. They're cutting the municipalities' funding. We're hearing from municipalities all across the province, in rural Alberta, in the cities, talking about the concerns that they have with the complete destruction of funding for municipalities.

Now, I'm the culture critic, and I've worked with organizations that support communities all across the province, whether it's our ag societies or community leagues. They're really the heart of our province, and it's what so many Albertans rely on. We have heard over and over and over that the community leagues are struggling. Community leagues rely on funding from many different venues. They look to the community that they live in. So if they're from Edmonton, they rely on the Edmonton community, they rely on the participants of that community, the people that are coming to their community leagues. They look to the city that provides the structure where they are. They look to them for funding. They look to the province for funding and support, and unfortunately we've seen their revenue opportunities incredibly decreased.

They can't hold events anymore, so where they used to have perhaps a spring fair or carnival or an Easter egg hunt, they can't do those things because of COVID and the restrictions. They used to be able to rely on casino funding. Here we have a government that took casino funding, the lottery fund, and put it in general revenue, and it's sitting there. Community leagues do not have access to it. Nonprofits don't have access to it.

When you have a community league that is struggling – let's say the town of Cochrane. One of the councillors there, Tara McFadden, has identified the incredible importance of community recreational infrastructure. They can't access the regular revenue streams that they've relied on, so when you look at Bill 56 and how it's absolutely gutting our Alberta municipalities, how are these communities supposed to function? They rely on so many different avenues of income and support that they can't access. They can't host fundraisers. They can't have a casino because the casinos aren't open. They can't ask their community members to come together to support. People want to do something. They want to contribute. When you have a bill like Bill 56, that's continuing to gut municipalities more, that means those payments are falling onto that direct municipality. Their infrastructure is crumbling. We hear

stories from all across the province. I'm sure every member in this room has some sort of facility that is in dire straits. Some facility that the community relies on needs support.

Unfortunately, this government has set up nothing in this budget to actually support communities or to support those gathering places that are going to be the first place to open when the COVID restrictions start lifting. Those are going to be the first responders in the community that are going to want to have people come together. They're going to want to go to their community league. They're going to want to be able to go to their recreational centre. But if they're falling apart, Madam Speaker, and the funding isn't being supported by the province – and now with cuts to the municipalities it's not going to be supported by the municipality – what's going to happen to these communities? It's very, very frustrating when you hear so many volunteers that want to be able to support and give back, so many people that want to come together and help fix the local skating rink that's falling apart or want to build that park that's falling apart, and they can't. They don't have access to the support through the government. They don't have funds that are available. It's a time right now where community wants to come together, and they can't.

We see proposals coming forward from community leagues and organizations all across the province with ideas of how to get their infrastructure updated. They talk about being able to create jobs, and they talk about being able to put local people back to work. That community league that needs a new floor or maybe where the furnace system needs an upgrade or the lighting or their sound system – when you're not worried about having the venue booked for weddings and anniversaries and birthday parties, now is the perfect time to get into those facilities and upgrade. They don't have to be closed; they're already closed. People – the local plumber, the local electrician – that those community leagues rely on all the time are struggling. When you look at Bill 56, you're hearing outcries from municipal leaders all across the province saying they need help. Now is the time to invest in those projects. Now is the time to get those people in our communities back to work, those small businesses that rely on the work that their community league provides and that their recreation structure offers.

We hear so many community leagues that are trying to be creative. They're trying to create opportunities for people to gather, whether it's on Zoom, or they're doing some sort of virtual scavenger hunt. They're trying to create a space that allows community to come together. When we're no longer under these restrictions, people want to go back to their home base. They want to be able to go back to those buildings and those facilities that they've relied on, that sense of home and that sense of comfort. The drop-in centre where teenagers would drop in, those kids that had nowhere to go but knew on a Friday night that their community centre offered a drop-in for them to go hang out with some pretty cool adults and some peers that could relate to them: that's not happening. We're at risk of losing those facilities if we're going to continue to cut our municipalities.

Tara McFadden from Cochrane is a town councillor, and she had said: "I feel our recreation infrastructure has fallen behind and is something we really need to focus on. It's become apparent through COVID just how important our recreation is not only for our physical health but our emotional well-being and how it brings a community together." They talk about the importance of having the MSI funding being supported and reliable. Things like their community centres, their recreation centres are at risk because of these cuts. A 25 per cent cut to the MSI is huge. That has a major impact. We've heard from rural communities who are concerned that they just aren't viable. We are at risk of losing them.

8:00

This is something that our government leaders, I'm sure, are hearing. We're hearing it on this side of the House. We know that so many are saying: you know, we don't know what to do; we keep reaching out. People are making phone calls, they're sending e-mails, they're sending letters, they're sending letter petitions. We see communities going to the media to talk about their concerns because they're saying that this government isn't listening. On one hand this government is saying that they want to create jobs, but when you take money away from municipalities, you're taking away their ability to actually create jobs, by supporting infrastructure. One of the best ways to get people in your community back to work is building infrastructure, repairing infrastructure, and this cut under Bill 56 is really, really frightening, and the government isn't listening.

We hear from community leaders all across the province, expressing their concerns. They want to be listened to. They're talking about what's going to happen to the people that they serve. What it means, unfortunately, is probably increased property taxes, probably cuts to services, and, again, the actual viability of some of these municipalities. Some of these municipalities are in such debt, and making a further cut could actually threaten their viability, Madam Speaker. This is something that I think this government really needs to consider when they're making these cuts.

When we talk about the upgrade for 911, what this piece of legislation is doing is it's taking a technology upgrade that has to occur, and it's putting the cost on the municipality without provincial support. What does that mean? It means that if you're a family of four, you're likely going to pay an additional \$25 a year because of this bill in a time when Albertans aren't working, in a time of a pandemic. When we see that this government took away the caps on insurance, their insurance rates are going up. All of their spending is increasing because this government isn't protecting the average Albertan. They're making all of these decisions that are having dire impacts on families. We look at the pleas that this side of the House has made to look at affordable child care so that two members of a household can return to the workforce if possible. They can't afford child care. Car insurance rates are going up. Now cellphone rates are going up.

The reality, Madam Speaker, is that more and more people in a household have a cellphone. Children are getting cellphones because they're walking to and from school, and their parents want them to be able to be in touch with them, so that's a fee for safety that now has been downloaded onto a family. The government isn't supporting the upgrade for their 911 system to the municipalities. They're asking the municipalities – not even asking. This bill tells the municipalities that they're paying for it.

In a time when Albertans are really struggling, I'm very confused how this government could hear these horrific stories – because I know they're hearing them. We're hearing them. We hear heart-wrenching stories of the impacts that this COVID pandemic has had on families. We hear people pleading for support, pleading for access to services, doing simple things like putting an insurance cap so that people's rates aren't tripling in some instances. We look at utilities and the skyrocketing bills that people are receiving. People shouldn't have to consider paying for a cellphone, paying for heat and water, or groceries.

I'm just very confused when we have people who are elected to represent their municipalities all across this province coming together to express concern to a government, and the government isn't listening. These are elected officials that are representing their municipalities across the entire province. It's not just one area of Edmonton, one area of Calgary; the entire province is being

impacted by these decisions. Leaders that were elected to represent their communities are coming forward, saying: we have concerns. Why aren't we listening?

It's very concerning to me, Madam Speaker, when we have a government that is just putting through legislation without considering the consequence of that. It's very upsetting to have so many people that are in positions of being of service to their community and still not being heard. They're still not being listened to. The average Albertan is worried. They hear concerns about safety. They hear concerns about their children in school, about their loved ones in seniors' homes, and we're just not seeing anything in this piece of legislation that actually is supportive of a municipality. I would like to know from the government who they're listening to. How do they speak to these elected officials?

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate? The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm honoured to be speaking on Bill 56, the local measures act. I'm particularly honoured to be speaking about the modernization of Alberta's 911 technology, for amendments to the Emergency 911 Act. The 911 system is in desperate need of modernization because it is nearly 30 years old, and it's been 30 years since it's been updated. Albertans need to know that they can continue to have safe, reliable services when they call or text 911 during an emergency.

Yes, I did say "text." Once the system upgrades are complete, Albertans will be able to text 911 in situations where they cannot call. This will be very useful in situations such as if a victim of domestic abuse needs to get hold of 911. I've seen many scenarios where quietly texting 911 would be much more beneficial. Women walking at night might keep a 911 message written out, and all it takes is a tap of "send" if someone were to attack, stalk, or in any way harm them. It adds a sense of security, and I'm very glad that this change has been made. It is also more in line with the younger generation for they might be too anxious to get on the phone with 911 in the case of an emergency.

This technology upgrade is also very affordable as it will only cost 7 cents extra to phone bills, which will be effective September 1 of this year. These technology upgrades will only have an effect on the 911 emergency dispatch callers and will not affect EMS, policing, firefighters, or anything else related to first responders. These changes will make it better for 911 dispatch services to work better, regardless of who answers the phone.

These much-needed upgrades to the emergency services are also due soon. The federal government, through the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, also known as the CRTC, has mandated that Canada's 911 system be upgraded to next-generation 911 technology by March 30 of 2024. This is in line with other provinces and is crucial to cover the cost of the system upgrades. For example, Saskatchewan has announced that their levy will be \$1.88 per month due to differences in provincial systems.

Next-generation 911 will improve location accuracy of calls to verify a caller's civic address or device location. This will also help with locating callers in rural and remote areas and determine the height of a call, for example, in a tall building in an urban setting. With this technology 911 services will be able to quickly and accurately respond to emergency situations more efficiently. Upgrading this technology will be upgrading the range for the

broadband in areas that are underserved by cellphone service providers. Even in areas with poor or very little cellphone coverage if the area has broadband or Wi-Fi coverage, the 911 call will be processed through the network under the next-generation 911.

I'm very excited for this next generation of 911 services. This is a much-needed change. Our province and the world have been developing amazing technology over the past 30 years, and it's about time that our systems, especially emergency systems, reflect these times. Using GPS signals when calling or texting 911 will allow emergency responders to accurately find you in an emergency situation. There would not be even a need to send a PIN location drop through text. Keeping Albertans safe is our number one priority. By having an updated and unique system, we are protecting the safety and security of Albertans, which is a core government responsibility.

8:10

There are also many stakeholders who agree with this change. The Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services said that texting and enhanced 911 access offers "survivors of domestic and sexual violence a safe and discrete option to reach out." Dale McFee, the president of the Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police, said, "Enhancing access to Alberta's 911 centres will . . . improve emergency service response . . . [it's] a game-changer for public safety and first responders." I think it's very important to hear from stakeholders that work with people who may need to use the emergency services and emergency responders who may be indirectly affected.

I am very proud of this bill and the amazing work that Alberta's government has done to try to modernize our emergency response system. I believe that this will help a lot of Albertans who are in sensitive and scary situations who will need to discreetly text 911. I also am in favour of the wide range that the 911 services will be able to reach with the next-generation 911 system.

Bill 56, the local measures act, is much-needed legislation, and I'm glad to support and urge all MLAs in the Legislative Assembly to vote in favour of this bill.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I'd just take a moment to remind all members of this House that if you would like to have a conversation, perhaps the members' lounge is a good place to do that. Sometimes talking with these masks on makes you talk a little louder, and I can't hear the speakers.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is currently available. Are there any members wishing to speak?

Seeing none, are there any members wishing to join debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I will endeavour to enunciate as much as I can for our friends up in *Hansard*, recognizing that newfound challenge for them.

Madam Speaker, it's my honour to rise and speak to Bill 56, the Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. I won't beat around the bush. I feel that this bill is terrible, quite frankly, and I'll talk about why. First of all, this is the first bill since under former Premier Ed Stelmach, who codified MSI, or the municipal sustainability initiative, for municipalities in order to begin the conversation to deliver on predictable, sustainable funding, which is something that municipalities have been asking governments for since they were first created through legislation.

Now, for those Albertans watching at home who don't realize this, municipalities actually exist through provincial legislation but are a very, very important order of government. I will say that as I

go through my comments on this bill in second reading, Madam Speaker, I will juxtapose the previous governments' support and programs and commitment to municipalities versus this current piece of legislation and the current government, who, at every turn, is cutting budgets to municipalities while putting more and more of the burden of costs of programs and services onto those municipalities.

This was a trick, Madam Speaker, that the former Premier Ralph Klein did and did very, very well, where he ended up – I mean, I love when those of the former Wildrose Party talk about and show the image of Ralph Klein with the paid-in-full sign on the cheque. The reality is that it wasn't. I encourage you to go back and do your homework because what he effectively did was transfer the costs from the provincial ledger, the provincial budget, onto municipalities. A great accounting game. Fantastic. Accountants everywhere said: "Bravo. Way to go. You actually didn't pay off the debt; you transferred it to another order of government and said, 'Now it's your problem.'" "Oh, but we're paid in full." No, you're not. You're actually not.

I encourage members of the front bench to stand up and speak on the record. I'd love to engage back and forth on this discussion point because it's irksome, Madam Speaker, that . . .

Some Hon. Members: Irksome?

Mr. Bilous: Apparently, I'm using language that is . . .

Mr. Eggen: Irksome?

Mr. Bilous: . . . confusing some colleagues on both sides of the House. Irksome: have we not heard this before in the Chamber? Goodness gracious, Madam Speaker, through you to the members: please let me choose my vocabulary at will.

It's frustrating, Madam Speaker, that the message was that the province had gotten itself out of debt, and the reality is that it hadn't; it was transferred to a different order of government.

You know, what I find interesting, Madam Speaker, is that when I was first elected and I engaged with municipal leaders around the province and talked to them about some of the issues and challenges that they're facing, a reality that many councillors from urban centres to rural counties to MDs all talked about was the fact that 90 per cent – 90; nine zero – of services that are delivered on behalf of government are actually delivered at the municipal level. The challenge that our municipalities have is that they do not have the financial tools or instruments that the province or the federal government does in order to generate revenue in order to deliver those services.

Municipalities really have only a couple of tools available, the first one and primarily being your property taxes, which, of course, is a regressive tax that members of this side of the House have argued time and time again. But the fact of the matter is that they have very few tools at their disposal in order to deliver critical services like fire and policing, that deal with infrastructure, taking care of our roads, our bridges, clearing snow, filling potholes – I mean, something that everyone who drives in the city, including all members of this Chamber, whether or not they live in Edmonton, spend enough time here to know that these are challenges that the city faces. However, despite the fact that municipalities deliver 90 per cent of the services, they have access to I think it's a 10th of the financial tools that the province or the federal government does.

At a time where we are facing unprecedented challenges, unprecedented unemployment numbers sustained, this government is bringing forward a piece of legislation that is actually cutting the very budgets of the order of government that delivers the most services directly to citizens. We're talking about citizens

everywhere, Madam Speaker, including in Airdrie, in Calgary, in Cochrane, in Red Deer, all over the province. So it is extremely frustrating and not surprising, quite frankly, that there are a number – in fact, a long list – of locally elected officials who are speaking out against this bill, talking about the fact that this is now legislating and codifying hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts to municipalities.

The part that is the most frustrating is that the provincial government can do this, cut their budgets, and then step back, and when municipalities say, "We have no choice but to raise property taxes," the provincial government attacks them, as we've seen from the former Minister of Municipal Affairs, who would attack municipalities over and over and over again for trying to deliver the very services that the citizens that they were elected to represent elected them for. Madam Speaker, municipalities cannot run deficits. Now, that's a fascinating concept. I loved getting into discussions with the former Wildrose leader Danielle Smith about deficits because she hates deficits, but good for her for buying her house with \$300,000 cash. Oh, wait a minute – no, she didn't. No. At least – I don't know, to be honest – it's unlikely that she did. Has anyone in this Chamber purchased a house with your savings? I doubt it. An inheritance doesn't count.

8:20

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, I'd just remind you to direct your comments through the chair.

Mr. Bilous: Apologies, Madam Speaker. Through you to all members. My point is not to go after Danielle Smith. In fact, everyone in this Chamber should know that I have a great rapport with her and have always. My point is that I don't know personally of any Albertans who can afford to buy a house without having to take out a mortgage or borrow. I'm not saying that doesn't exist; I'm saying I don't know of any, not in my circles, not in my friends, not in the people that I know.

The point is that there is a difference between good debt and bad debt. My point is that the fact that municipalities don't have access to debt and borrowing the way the other orders of government do puts them at a significant disadvantage. The reality – and government members, through you, Madam Speaker, by all means, jump up. If the government of Alberta could not access deficit funding, how would they possibly provide supports for anyone through COVID? Now, I'm not trying to debate the fact that their supports through COVID have been pathetic at best. That's not the point. The point is that municipalities don't have that luxury. It's not even a luxury. They don't have that tool available. They're the order of government that provides the most services directly to citizens. They have the fewest tools available to be able to access dollars to provide those services that Albertans rely on and depend on.

Every member in this Chamber represents at least one municipality, some dozens, that all are expected to provide services, services to help citizens, services to help businesses to ensure that goods flow in and out of our province. They're absolutely necessary, Madam Speaker. So any bill that actively looks to significantly reduce the budget of these municipalities, to then turn and say, "Yeah, now we want you to not only continue to provide the level of service that you have; you need to actually increase those services, because Alberta" – our population is constantly increasing. There is a growing, constant demand for all services provided by all orders of government. It's frustrating.

I mean, in addition, this bill is forcing municipalities to pay for the 911 upgrades that this government has foisted upon municipalities. Foisted. Oh, I chose that word carefully. You know

why, Madam Speaker? Because municipalities didn't ask for it. They didn't want it. We know from studies that this consolidated service has led to longer response times. Don't take my word for it. Talk to fire. Talk to EMS. Talk to police. Talk to the experts. I mean, this is, sadly, an ongoing trend that this government continues, to introduce legislation and make decisions without consulting the very experts. Or the government is and, quite frankly, doesn't care what they say. It's one or the other. When it comes to 911, we know that it is not leading to better outcomes.

Members of this Chamber should know that in my time since I was first elected, I will be the first member to give credit where credit's due to any government regardless of political stripes, but I also will be critical of any government that makes decisions that are not in the best interests of the citizens of this province and are leading with direct outcomes. I urge the government, through you, Madam Speaker, to table documents that show that 911 service calls are going to be improved and have been improved and enhanced, wait times reduced through this centralization of 911. Because every single municipally elected official I've talked to has provided documents that show that those times have grown.

Through this bill, Madam Speaker, the government of Alberta has increased costs to municipalities by \$41 million at the same time as making massive cuts to their budgets and then has the audacity, some members of this government, to blame municipal leaders for their budgeting and to criticize them. This government cut the policing line item through at least one budget – I believe it was two budgets – and then turned around and blamed municipalities, saying: we didn't cut the police budget; you're in charge of the budget; you make those decisions. Some would call that scapegoating.

Ms Goehring: Or a Jedi mind trick.

Mr. Bilous: I do have to repeat that so *Hansard* picks it up. My colleague from Edmonton-Castle Downs just said: or a Jedi mind trick.

Either way, Madam Speaker, I'm not trying to make light of the fact that the cuts that are being proposed through this bill are unacceptable, and when members of the government say to Albertans that we don't have the money, we have to make these cuts, I ask the government to look at spending, like, the \$30 million a year on the war room, that has been a joke to the international community. In fact, it's hurting investment in Alberta. I get that the Minister of Energy will stand up and defend this, but I promise you that in a few years from now, when there are third-party audits of the war room, they will come to show . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I listened to my colleague with interest, and it is irksome to see government cut municipalities' funding and foist their agenda on to municipalities, so I would ask my colleague – he was finishing up about audits of the energy war room – if he would like to comment further on that one.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate that my colleague on the opposite side, from Cardston-Siksika, is itching to get into this debate. I thank you, sir, for your eagerness to get in.

I do want to thank my colleague the Member for Edmonton – Calgary-McCall; we could make an Edmonton-McCall, too – for his question.

Madam Speaker, I will endeavour to move much more quickly. I mean, there are a number of questions that I have for the government on this piece of legislation, and I do hope that in Committee of the Whole the minister and his colleagues can respond to some if not all of these questions because they are being asked to us, the Official Opposition, on behalf of Albertans. My first question: has the government tallied up the total amount of funding that they've either cut or downloaded to municipalities? Now, I appreciate the fact that we will get into a debate over the definition of downloaded, but my point is this. If municipalities are given new responsibilities and new fiscal burdens or challenges that are placed on them for their new responsibilities, has the government kept track of that dollar amount? I would argue that the civil service has. Having worked directly with many of Alberta's finest, I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that the ministry would have access to those numbers, and I would love to hear from the government as far as what the total is on how much funding they've cut.

I'm curious to know and I would love to see some internal documents of the government as far as how they expect Albertans to pay for increased property taxes.

8:30

Here's the kicker, Madam Speaker. I really enjoyed this when we were in government, when the UCP opposition would call for budget cuts in question period – let's say question 3 – and then in question 6 a member would get up and talk about how important it is to have a school in his or her riding. Wonderful. Did you listen to question 3? You can't have it both ways. You can't make massive cuts to the budget and then talk about investing in infrastructure, in schools, in roads, in culverts, and in hospitals. That anomaly or that contradiction was never justified, accounted for, but it was frustrating to hear.

The fact that through this bill MSI is being cut significantly at the same time that the government is asking municipalities to pay more for infrastructure – here's another one: the fact that families are going to have to pay more on their cellphone bills. I wish the line item on their bill would actually say, "Brought to you by the UCP government of Alberta," because it should.

The fact of the matter is that this government has shown through action that they will continue to nickel and dime Albertans. You can't say in good conscience, "We're not raising taxes on you," and then you increase personal income taxes through the creep. You know, I welcome any debate on the fact of, "No, we're not raising personal income taxes." You removed the bracket, so anybody that gets increases for cost-of-living inflation and moves into a next bracket: you've increased taxes on them.

You can wordsmith the heck out of this all day long. Let's play semantics. You've increased costs. You've increased park fees. You've increased insurance rates.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I'll just remind all members of this House to direct their comments through the chair.

I see the hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika on second reading of Bill 56.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It is an honour to rise this evening and speak on this bill, Bill 56, the local measures act. Now, I have to start by thanking the member opposite from Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview for his remarks. While we do disagree, I also like to give that member credit. He always comes prepared, ready to speak, and actually gives remarks that I think are fulsome and add to the debate, especially raise the level of decorum, and I mean that with all sincerity, just so we're very clear.

I did find certain parts of his speech a bit vexing – I’ll see your “irksome” and raise you “vexing” – about the issue of 911. If we take a trip down memory lane, not that long ago, back to about a year ago, there was an incident in Oregon, Ohio – some of you may have read about this in the news – where a woman dialed 911 to order a pizza. Now, if you’re not familiar with the story, it goes – and I’m paraphrasing here – that the woman dialed 911 to order a pizza. The dispatcher, who had been working there for, I think, about 13 years, was quite curious as to what this was about but from his years of experience realized from the tone of the lady’s voice who was calling that she was not ordering a pizza but was, in fact, in distress, and it was a domestic violence call. Because of this dispatcher’s experience in the job and ability to cipher through some of the pizza order, frankly, they were able to dispatch someone to that scene and help this lady.

Now, the reason why I say this, Madam Speaker, is because this is an instance where having an updated 911 service that would allow for text messaging rather than phone calling would be quite beneficial.

The reality here is that the federal government has mandated, through the CRTC, which is the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, that Canada’s 911 systems must be upgraded, next generation, by March 30, 2024. This is a necessity for us, Madam Speaker. This is something that’s being mandated by the federal government, something our province is responding to, and I’m grateful for the minister for responding in this way.

I recognize that there are costs associated with this that will be reflected on cellular bills, but I do believe that compared to other jurisdictions, this is a marginal cost. I could be mistaken again, and I don’t want to assume too much, but I know that Saskatchewan’s numbers are higher than ours. Again, this is not an attempt by the provincial government to gouge cellphone payers but, rather, to offset the cost of updating the 911 system. I appreciate the sentiment from members opposite on this in showing genuine concern for taxpayers across the province, but the reality is that this is not a substantial increase in our bills.

The next thing is the issue of MSI. Now, I know that there is a real concern from the members opposite about MSI and the decrease over the next three years of 25 per cent, so let me say for the record here, as it has been already said this evening, that MSI will reflect in the next three years \$1.196 billion in 2021-22, \$485 million in ’22-23, and \$485 million in ’23-24. Alberta’s government is front-loading MSI now because, as the member opposite already stated, in times like this municipal projects are a great way to get people working and to improve infrastructure so that as we climb out of this difficult time that we are in with the pandemic, we have the infrastructure to excel and do as many of the financial institutions in this province have already said that we will do, which is lead the country in economic growth.

Now, I think that this is a tremendous point of – it’s a great bragging point for this province. The fact that we are in what I think is probably the worst crisis that this province has seen in this generation – and though I am quite young, I think that, relatively, I can’t think of anything else that was probably more devastating than this. You’re talking about a triple black swan event, where you have a number of problems, including the crash of oil, this pandemic. It breaks my heart – it breaks my heart, Madam Speaker – to see the devastation across the country, across the world that this pandemic has caused and the need to respond to it. But there is hope – there is hope, indeed – that Alberta has taken a measured approach to responding to the pandemic to ensure that when we are able to get out of this difficult time, we will in fact lead the country in economic growth. Businesses across Canada are seeing that.

The MSI funding: if I can go back to that to again make the point for the members opposite, which is front-loading MSI so municipalities can take care of projects that they’ve been waiting for in the wings for quite some time but maybe didn’t have the resources for at the moment. All of this to say that no matter which way you cut it, Alberta and the rest of the country of Canada are certainly in very difficult times, and we must be measured in our approach to ensure that we’re protecting the lives and the livelihoods of Albertans while also preparing ourselves for an economic recovery. I think we have done a very good job of that, Madam Speaker. As I have already stated, several financial institutions, including the Conference Board of Canada, have said that Alberta will lead the country in economic growth.

I applaud the Premier for the measures he’s taken. I applaud the ministers associated with this helping to get us back in this economic recovery, and I applaud the minister for bringing forth this bill to make the necessary changes that we need to see in Alberta.

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

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, any members wishing to join debate in second reading of Bill 56? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It’s a pleasure to rise and speak to second reading of the Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. I just want to actually follow up on the comment that the hon. member just finished on, which is around the economic growth of Alberta. Something that I think we’ve been seeing happen over the last couple of weeks, months is the government continuously standing up and saying: well, the banks say that we’re going to lead in economic growth across the country.

8:40

There’s a line that the government continues to not speak about, and that is the fact that we lost so many jobs and our economic outlook in Alberta was so poor over the last year that the economic growth that we’re seeing is actually us catching up with the rest of the country. It’s not leading in the sense of: we’re going to create way more than anywhere else in the country. All the banks are saying is: oh, Alberta is going to slowly start to catch up to everywhere else and start to actually get back online with the jobs that they should have had eight months ago. So although it is a line that the banks will use around economic growth, for sure, we’re not going to be where we were. We may be leading the country right now, but that’s only because we’re trying to get the jobs back that we lost. There’s no win in that statement.

When we look at this Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, and we look at the fact that this government continues to cut supports to Albertans at a time when they need them most, in every area – we see it right now with municipalities, who are providing the basic supports to Albertans at a time when many of them aren’t working, when many of them need mental health supports, when many of them need access to parks and to outdoor activities so that they can get out of their house and be social. Many live on their own who don’t have the ability to spend time with other people. So the very infrastructure that these municipalities are providing right now is a major part of what is keeping many of our Albertans healthy, yet what we see this government want to do is to cut those supports.

You know, it parallels with something else that happened within this budget, which is around ag societies. I’m sure the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry can speak to this. There was a significant

push by the minister to try to cut ag society funding within the budget. Ag societies, as many of our rural communities know, are the providers of many of the services that municipalities provide their citizens. They build the pools. They provide the rodeos. They do the skating rinks. They are volunteers that run all of this infrastructure that many of our smaller municipalities rely on to be able to make sure that Albertans have access to those recreational activities. Not only was the government planning on cutting the municipalities' support and funding for the basic services that municipalities are trying to provide, but they were also then going to cut the funding for ag societies, that also provide those supports. So we were seeing basically all services that Albertans access for recreational supports, many of their social networks, the way that we build communities in this province, the way we bring people together – this government was going to cut their funding. It is a fundamental issue.

When we think about the overall health of Albertans – you know, I've heard many of the members talk about 911. While this is an important part of this bill, well, this is where the cognitive disconnect is so apparent. You want people to be healthy, you want people to be able to have access to supports . . .

An Hon. Member: There was a cognitive disconnect.

Ms Sweet: I wanted to amp up the Scrabble game, so thought I'd add that one in there with cognitive dissonance.

But the reality of it is that if people aren't healthy and they're not doing well, then they will be accessing 911. So why wouldn't we put structures in place? Why wouldn't we fund municipalities to make sure that they can provide those community supports, that they can make sure that people have access to transportation, that people have access to recreational activities, access to counselling services, all of those things that are provided under MSI, so that, hopefully, they wouldn't need to access 911 calls?

But then on top of that, if they do have to now call 911, depending on where they live in the province, the service that they're going to receive isn't even going to be in their community. Calgary has spoken out about how changing 911 from EMS isn't something that they want. Red Deer and Red Deer county have spoken out about the fact that they do not support the changes to 911. Lethbridge has spoken out. The Lethbridge mayor has spoken out, and I can quote it if the member across would like me to. Wood Buffalo has also spoken out. We've seen mayor after mayor after mayor who met with the Minister of Health to say: changes to this will cost seconds of response times, which could potentially cost a life. So why are you doing it?

Response: well, we want to do it to save money. Okay. Okay. Well, then why is the 911 service fee going from 44 cents to 95 cents on everybody's cellphone? Seventeen million dollars annually is what 44 cents brings in under 911 service charges right now, going up to \$41 million next year – \$41 million. And what is it supposed to be saving, to be moving the 911 services out of these rural communities? Six million dollars, maybe. So, again, cognitive dissonance. It doesn't make any sense. The math doesn't add up.

Because of that, Madam Speaker, I have a reasoned amendment that I would like to table. The amendment reads as follows – and I do have the requisite copies. I will read it into the record while it's being sent out. Just one copy to you?

The Deputy Speaker: No. Just wait until I have a copy, please.

Ms Sweet: You need the original. That probably would be best.

The Deputy Speaker: Yup.

Hon. members, this will be known as amendment RA1.

Hon. member, just note moving on behalf of another member.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise to move RA1 on behalf of the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West that the motion for second reading of Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, be amended by deleting all of the words after “that” and substituting the following:

Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, be not now read a second time because the Assembly is of the view that municipalities cannot sustain the reduction in funding proposed by the bill without making substantial cuts to services or substantial increases to property taxes.

Again, Madam Speaker, I did see a member opposite shaking his head when I mentioned the mayor of Lethbridge having a concern around the 911 changes. I'll table this tomorrow, but it is an article by the CBC.

Lethbridge Mayor Chris Spearman says they've appealed to Premier Jason Kenney to overrule Alberta Health Services and keep the current municipal systems, but there's been no reply.

“We have a minister who is ignoring the best practice and choosing to impose a system that their bureaucrats have long desired, which is not in the interest of Albertans . . . So my appeal is to Premier Kenney: overrule your health minister or change the health minister. He's not listening to Albertans.”

In a letter to the mayors in October, Health Minister Tyler Shandro . . .

Sorry, hon. member, Health minister. I retract the name.

. . . said he had reviewed the situations and decided to proceed.

“My decision is not to overturn AHS's decision.”

And I retract the minister's name.

Again, Madam Speaker, there is one example right there. We obviously have some other examples from Grande Prairie, Medicine Hat where there have been comments made around the changes to 911. Again, I think it's been very clear – and I think that this is where the fundamental difference really starts to show itself – that the opposition here clearly continues to listen and hear the concerns from the different mayors, from Albertans around these very issues. We know that ensuring that there is appropriate and stable funding for municipalities is what keeps our communities healthy and vibrant. That would be the same for ag societies and the fact that we want to make sure that ag societies are funded, because if the municipality is building the infrastructure, the volunteers are the ones that are running it.

We have some other quotes here. The reeve of Ponoka county points out that the rural municipalities are already struggling with millions of dollars in unpaid property taxes owed by certain oil and gas companies. “In some municipalities, unpaid tax amounts are so high that service levels are being reduced, municipal staff are being laid off, and serious discussions are occurring about whether the municipalities can continue to function.” He said: the ability of farmers to get to field, to move large volumes of goods in short periods of time requires serious infrastructure investment; one thing we've seen is a tremendous size of machinery, tremendous volumes that are being moved out of Alberta Agriculture on our roads, and our road designs need to keep up with tremendous growth. That's a pretty serious issue, I would say. Of course, that was in the *Producer*, and I can get a copy of that and table that as well.

8:50

When we're looking at our rural municipalities and the fact that – and I'm sure the Minister of Agriculture would also speak to this – when you're trying to move your grain and you can't move your grain because the road's washed away or because the infrastructure is not in place, the oil hasn't been put down, it creates a problem. It creates a problem for farmers to get their product to market. Well, municipalities aren't going to have the money to keep those road systems up.

We're going to see the same issue when the toll bridges start coming into play. Albertans not wanting to pay the toll will start using our rural roads to go around the tolls, which will create more transportation, more demand on our roadways and our transportation corridors. What the municipalities are clearly saying is that we won't have the money to keep those infrastructure requirements in place. We saw it even in the north when we started to see all of the runoff and the amount of water that was sitting on the fields that was washing out the roads. Again, it took weeks to get some of those bridges and those roads back into place. It cost the municipalities a substantial amount of money to be able to do that, and now they're being told: well, that's too bad, so sad, but we're not going to give you any more supports for that. So there are lots of concerns and lots of issues with this.

Again, we haven't really heard this government come forward and come up with a solution around the taxes that are still being owed by oil and gas companies. I mean, maybe one of the ministers would like to stand and speak to that and tell the municipalities why it is that they have to download all of the costs onto their citizens while they have oil and gas companies who still owe property taxes to the municipalities. That's a huge amount of money. You want to help municipalities out? Let's get a way to get those taxes paid. Let's find different ways where we can make sure that municipalities are vibrant and are sustainable. And there are things that are happening that the government could be addressing that doesn't cut funding but, in fact, will support the municipalities in being able to access more.

If we look at what's going on with the town of Cochrane right now: "I feel our recreational infrastructure has fallen behind and is something we really need to focus on. It has become apparent through COVID just how important our recreation is not only for our physical health but emotional well-being and how it brings the community together. It's something that is really important, so I'm really enjoying working with the committee and advancing the projects that are happening in Cochrane."

Of course, again, as I have gone back and said numerous times through this speech, that speaks also to the programs that are offered through our ag societies. I would hope that as we're looking through these different programs that are being cut, the ministers that also have those portfolios, that have the ability to maybe boost funding for different services that are being provided or different agencies that are being provided will be doing that instead of cutting those services. Again, if we start cutting ag societies and now we're cutting municipality budgets and then the next thing is we're increasing property taxes – oh, and parks. Albertans, if they want to leave their house now, will have to pay to use every service in this province at a time when many of them aren't working.

To say to someone, "The healthiest thing you can do this summer is to go camping, because then you are within your cohort, you're outside, and the likelihood of being exposed to COVID is less," and then say, "But you have to pay to use that service, and, oh, we're going to increase the cost of that for you. Yes, we know your property taxes are going up. Yes, we know your transit costs are probably going to go up. Yes, we know you might have to pay tolls, and your personal income tax has gone up. Oh, you know, what else could we charge you for? Let me think about it. I'm sure there's something else. Maybe land titles. If you want to go get a new house, you might have to pay more to pay for land titles, because we'll probably privatize that." There are just all these things that this government wants to do that wants to make sure that Albertans pay for it. There's no reason why the taxes that Albertans are already paying should provide them with the needs that they deserve. Apparently this government doesn't think that that's the way it should be.

You pay your taxes; we'll keep that money. We'll spend it on things that make no sense like war rooms and Bigfoot and all of these fights and legal challenges on a variety of different issues, but if you want to get on the bus, you have to pay more. If you want an LRT in your city, you can't have that because, you know, we're not paying for that this time. If you want to go camping or you want to go to a park or you want to go swimming, you have to pay more to go swimming. Like, these are things that young families do. It's what keeps young families healthy. So to see more pressure being put on Albertans at a time when they don't need it, when, in fact, they just need to feel supported . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate on amendment RA1 on Bill 56. Seeing the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise in the House to speak to amendment RA1 to Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. First of all, it was my pleasure, you know, to get the opportunity to hear the debate from my colleagues, who delivered their arguments so eloquently.

[Mr. Neudorf in the chair]

Looking at this bill and some of the actions, the changes the bill is trying to do, it is very actually interesting and surprising for me that this bill is basically brought forward by the UCP government in this House. The reason why this is so surprising to me is that since the UCP government took office in 2019, I have been hearing very different terminology, different debate in this House, and that seems very contradictory in this bill. It was a totally different narrative when the UCP government took office. We heard the words and terms more like autonomy, fair deals, and the responsibility of the governments. The province always, you know, wanted to hold the federal government responsible for helping the provinces, and all that I'm seeing in this bill is totally contradicting against what they have been trying to set up, for doing it in this province.

The other thing I do remember is my very first impression in this Assembly when we first got the chance and we got, you know, to share our maiden speeches. The members of the Assembly from both sides of the aisle so eloquently and so personally spoke about their ridings, the areas they were representing, the municipalities, the facilities and the services in their areas, and the challenges in their ridings, in their municipalities. Specifically I remember most of the members talking about the aging infrastructure in their municipalities impacting services, struggling governments. That's what I heard. That would be on the record. You can see that. That's what I still remember in my mind. It was not only the NDP members; it was most of the members in this House.

What I'm seeing, how this government could come up with these kind of powers and changes in mind amidst the economic crisis we are going through – the municipalities in today's democratic system are set up; they're fundamentally important to deliver the services to citizens and their buildings.

9:00

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

We have seen that the government brought up changes in the past. The municipalities, you know, spoke out against it. The government kind of did not buy the argument and did not buy the argument of the opposition party in the House. But then we had facts. We had outcomes. The municipalities were to look around and deal with the

situation, and that was impacted by the growing cost of services for civilians. That is something that included – one area of the cost to the citizens of the municipalities was in the way of increased taxes, property taxes. Again, when I look back and remember the debate and the arguments from the Conservative politicians: lower taxes, lower taxes. In reality what I'm seeing in this House, the pattern of work, is that everything is happening against, on the contrary to the arguments and narratives in election campaigns that are being created in this province. So what is the government doing? This government is finding every possible way through this bill that they can download the cost to the municipalities.

The other surprising thing is that the majority of the UCP members come from small municipalities, and those municipalities are steadfast against these kinds of changes. What will it take for them to stand up, look into it, be reasonable, and represent their constituents? That is not the push we are seeing in this House. Municipalities are already running under the constraint of lost revenues due to the slow economy, losing businesses, lost revenue due to businesses being closed, and the tax liability against the super rich corporations that the provincial government specifically mandated and let happen. The big players are bad players and would just go by not paying the taxes to the municipalities. The unpaid tax liabilities have reached nearly \$245 million. That is the cost to them. That's about more than 200 per cent since the UCP took office in the province.

The UCP has already made the changes to our 911 emergency service. They still could not come up with justifying their move or being able to answer the questions raised by the municipal politicians, the hard-up municipalities, opposition, and the general public about how that has increased the service or efficiency of 911 and the safety of the people in this province. On top of that, the UCP is adding another cost to the citizens for the 911 emergency update program. That cost is about \$41 million for already-struggling people.

One of the things I just wanted to mention and put on the record probably. I have friends of mine – actually, they are a joint venture – providing transportation services. I remember the city of Camrose actually trying to work out the agreement with that company to make a transport arrangement between Edmonton and Camrose consecutively for two, three years, and then the municipality was not able to afford the cost they would need to come up with in order to make that arrangement.

This question probably won't be valid – like, who did you consult, and who provided you the feedback? When we see Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge, Cochrane, Canmore, and a number of other municipalities speaking against this bill, why is the government so adamant to move this bill when it's not going to help in any way any municipal governments and also not the citizens of this province?

To me, if I just leave with my own views, according to the narrative this government has been setting up since 2019, this bill seems pretty undemocratic and just a unilateral, one-sided, ideological approach, authoritarian approach. They're not even engaging the views from those very people and the local governments. They're party to this contract, and they're going to be affected by this bill.

That is the reason I support amendment RA1. It is very wise at this moment that this bill not be read a second time in this House. I'm just going to read the amendment for the record.

Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, be not now read a second time because the Assembly is of the view that municipalities cannot sustain . . .

key word,

. . . the reduction in funding proposed by the bill without making substantial cuts to services or substantial increases to property taxes.

That is what the Conservatives have always campaigned on, and now the government can just clearly tell us: how many dollars are you going to cut from the municipalities? Did you add it up? Did you already tally?

9:10

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate on amendment RA1 on Bill 56? The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak to debate on Bill 56 and the reasoned amendment on the bill. I think this is my first opportunity to join the House for an evening session, so I do say a good evening to all.

Now, my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Manning, of course, brought forward this amendment recognizing the undue burden this government is placing on municipalities with Bill 56. Now this, of course, has been largely the experience of municipalities with this government, even more so, I think, than perhaps any other previous Conservative government, and certainly there were some pretty fractious relationships at times between Progressive Conservative governments and municipalities in the province of Alberta.

Certainly, in the time that we were in government, we worked to smooth that out. We worked to support municipalities during what was a difficult economic period for them then as well, of course, which culminated in specific deals with Edmonton and Calgary, which this government, of course, chose to tear up despite the fact that it campaigned on a promise that it would not do so. The experience, I think, of many municipalities, certainly under the former Minister of Municipal Affairs, was a somewhat antagonistic one and certainly a very paternalistic one, Madam Speaker; an awful lot of condescension. That is, indeed, what we see continuing, perhaps with a bit of a nicer face on it and a bit of a politer tone but certainly from this legislation we continue to see that lack of respect from the provincial government for their municipal partners.

Indeed, this government does not seem to see them, Madam Speaker, as partners. They see them as theirs to control. I mean, now, recognizing that municipalities, of course, are created by provincial legislation, but that said, they are an elected order of government. Indeed, we can see great leadership from these orders of government in the work they do for their communities.

Now, one area of particular contention which is tied into this, as the Member for Lethbridge-East spoke about as well as my colleague from Edmonton-Manning, is of course the area around 911 and ambulance dispatch. Now, certainly, again, in this bill we have here the government making some sweeping cuts to municipalities and, again, utterly undermining their ability to continue to provide services and supports to their communities, much as we have had with the 911 service and ambulance dispatch. To be clear, this is yet another place, Madam Speaker, where this government has been so incredibly condescending and paternalistic towards municipalities.

Now, at a joint press conference that was held by the four mayors that were affected on February 1, they noted some of the profound issues they have encountered already. They talked about an incident on January 26, just 13 hours after Calgary's system was consolidated by AHS, and they talked about how AHS failed to notify the paramedics of an outage at the Calgary dispatch centre that lasted 72 minutes, leading to a 16-minute response delay.

Sixteen minutes. Now, AHS contests that it was actually only a 42-minute outage as opposed to a 72-minute outage, but they certainly have not contested the fact that it led to a 16-minute response delay. That could very well cost a life, Madam Speaker. AHS did not, either, provide any explanation for that disruption, as the letters wrote in a letter to the Health minister.

In Wood Buffalo a caller requested an ambulance, was transferred three times, and had to provide their address six times, resulting in a four-minute delay. There was an incident in Lethbridge where a fire dispatch monitor caught a delay in an ambulance dispatch for an individual who was suffering chest pains. They were fortunately able to send fire resources there with just a brief delay, but if he had not caught that disruption, it could have been a 30-plus minute wait, Madam Speaker. These are municipalities who had their dispatch systems well in hand, local control. Indeed, the mayors offered to pay the difference in the cost, so it would not have even cost the province a single extra dollar to allow them to continue to maintain that local control. The government said: no; we know better.

That is why I support this reasoned amendment, which says that this bill should not be read a second time because it is impossible for this bill to go forward and have municipalities be able to sustain the reduction in funding that this bill proposes without them making substantial cuts to services or substantial increases to their property taxes. Now, again, as my colleagues have ably laid out, this is a government that loves to download costs on others. This is a government that loves to duck responsibility, loves to blame other people, be it Ottawa, be it everyday Albertans for failing to follow the rules well enough, as the Premier did just recently in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nothing is this government's fault.

Let me be clear, Madam Speaker. This government is making very short-sighted decisions when it comes to our municipalities. I'll outline one particular situation here in the city of Edmonton, which I've previously spoken about in this House. The city of Edmonton has asked this government for a mere \$4.9 million to fund support services for hundreds of units of supportive housing, a simple ask of the last budget that would save millions more in the health care system, in the justice system, and in social supports. They've made that request multiple times to this government, and they have not listened. As a result, the city of Edmonton was turned down for federal funding that would fund hundreds more units, because this government refuses to step up and make that investment, an investment, again, that would save money for the province as well as for the city of Edmonton.

Now, that is a local government that is showing leadership, Madam Speaker, leadership well beyond this government, in addressing the real issues, in solving the issue of houselessness in our city, as opposed to merely shuffling things around, pouring more money into the broken shelter system. In this bill we again see this government doing precisely the same thing, a government that continually leaves money on the table. These are federal dollars that could be going into construction, creating jobs here in the city of Edmonton, creating much-needed housing for individuals who are living houseless, but this government does not want to put any of its own money on the table.

So those dollars get lost, much as we saw with their yet to be announced jobs now program, which may be jobs eventually, jobs we sure hope so, at some time in the future but which we have yet to see an announcement on. We have no idea whether the tens of millions of dollars that they asked for in supplementary supply ever actually got out the door for that program. Because, again, they failed to act and they dragged their feet and they left dollars on the table because of their inability to collaborate, their insistence that they must control everything despite the fact that the loss then is

felt by Albertans, because they insist on pursuing their own political ends before the good of the province.

9:20

That is precisely what we have happening here, again, in Bill 56, where this government is levelling sweeping cuts on municipalities on top of those that they had already piled on previously, cuts to things like police funding, which the former Minister of Municipal Affairs and now Minister of Justice will of course swear up and down do not exist, but we know in fact they do. Again, this is a government that likes to play games with words to try to hide what his actions actually are and what the impacts actually are on the people of Alberta, but the municipalities know the truth. They have spoken out quite clearly on this point. They have spoken out about what the real impact of this bill is. Barry Morishita, the president of the AUMA, was quite clear that there are a lot of unintended consequences here, and that means a lot fewer people working in Alberta over the next three years.

As my colleague from Edmonton-Manning laid out quite clearly, this government likes to brag about what banks are saying now, but banks are talking about the fact that Alberta is going to perhaps begin to catch up with other provinces. We need to do better than that, Madam Speaker, and we could do if this government was choosing to make the investments that would put more Albertans back to work, that would allow the construction of this infrastructure that is going to prepare our province for the future, strengthen our communities. But, as Mr. Morishita says, this government is not doing that, and as a result of the choices they are making in this bill, the sweeping cuts, there are indeed going to be a lot fewer people working in Alberta over the next three years. He says that some projects are going to have to be laid aside; some infrastructure maintenance is going to go undone.

Reeve Jason Schneider from Vulcan speaks to this government's propensity for, again, not wanting to pay its share, not wanting to collaborate, leaving opportunity on the table because it has more important places for those dollars to go, Madam Speaker, places like their \$30 million embarrassment of a war room. After all, someone has to fight Bigfoot. That's more important than an investment in supportive housing or supporting the town of Vulcan. Reeve Jason Schneider talks about the funds for their new pool. The county is willing to provide roughly about \$1 million over four years towards recreation in Vulcan. He says that that's a significant contribution for them. That comes after six attempts to get funding from the MSI. It was a difficult conversation for them, he says. He recognizes the financial reality of living at the moment. He says that all municipalities are feeling the squeeze. We're cutting everything, says Mr. Schneider. So there is an opportunity, again, where this government could be supporting the town of Vulcan in providing and building for the future, enhancing their community, putting people to work in construction, but it's choosing to look the other way. It's choosing instead to level cuts.

Fort Saskatchewan mayor, Gale Katchur. Now, of course, her local MLA was standing and praising this bill just a moment ago, but she notes that this 2021 provincial budget, with the cuts in this that leave municipalities bracing for about a 25 per cent cut in infrastructure spending, means that their next city council is going to have to make some serious decisions. She said, in fact, of the budget: I don't think there are any wins for municipalities. Now, they had the foresight to see these cuts coming. They've got the read of this government, and again they'd seen the lack of collaboration under previous Municipal Affairs ministers, and they'd seen that this is not a government that is interested in investing in the province of Alberta, so they have made some adjustments in how they're approaching this. And, again, she

speaks of how: the city of Fort Saskatchewan has been working very diligently to keep our property taxes as low as we can while still providing high-quality services for our residents. Indeed, they are doing their best to provide leadership, Madam Speaker, because at least they remain accountable to the people. They are closest to the ground, as it were.

Admittedly, I have to say that they have been showing better leadership. I have not seen a collection – certainly not as many as 18 city councillors coming out and signing a letter undermining the public health officer, the chief medical officer of health, the public health officials, or our public health measures that are in place to protect Albertans. Now, I'm aware that there certainly are some amongst them that hold those views, but they have not taken the extraordinary step that we have seen members of this government caucus do in choosing to listen to particular members of their community but certainly not many others who are looking for the protection of public safety and health.

Again, I support this amendment. This government is, on so many fronts, failing Albertans and undermining the ability for communities to get back on their feet.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate on amendment RA1 on Bill 56? The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Madam Speaker. That's exactly where I represent here in the province of Alberta, and I'm very proud to do so. Of course, Edmonton-North West is part of the municipality of Edmonton, which has been affected quite negatively by this legislation that has been brought forward by this UCP government.

I think that the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West, who brought forward this reasoned amendment, is actually doing this UCP government a favour because, in fact, this legislation has so many negative effects on the budgets of our municipalities around the province that the backlash and the effects of legislation like this will have very far-reaching effects on the infrastructure that we all rely on in our cities, both large and small, the essential services that municipalities are responsible for, and indeed the health and safety of Albertans who either live in municipalities or use the services of our municipalities as part of their daily lives.

Really, at this time, at this juncture, to go directly attacking a municipal agreement that has been very longstanding and has served quite well between the province of Alberta and our municipalities across the province is a very perilous course to take at any time, but right now with the economic downturn and a serious health emergency right across the province it is definitely not the right time to do so. We have built within the legislative process ways by which we can reasonably take a step back and reasonably amend legislation that perhaps doesn't fit the reality of what we're dealing with on the ground here in the province.

I've never seen a better time to put forward a reasonable amendment that will not just help to keep the lights on in our municipalities across the province but, quite frankly, will help to send a more positive message from this UCP government to the province of Alberta, that they're willing to take a step back from the quite radical agenda that they've brought forward to cut services and to cut municipal services and responsibilities and to realize and recognize the circumstances that people are living in right now.

I can't think of a better example of the myriad of ways by which this negatively affects municipalities than in regard to 911 and emergency medical services across the province. Just a few days ago, when I was making some phone calls to different parts of

Alberta, which is a very interesting process, let me tell you, because there are people that are hopping mad, I had a very good conversation with an EMS person who works in a smaller town outside of Calgary, who described in great detail how the emergency medical service that she is a part of in this municipality has already been jeopardized by changes that this provincial government has made to EMS services. She said that wait times are longer, that she's getting stuck in Calgary for a much longer time once they do bring in emergency individuals to larger hospitals, and that indeed the system is stretched so that their response times are longer than they were before, longer than what could be considered reasonably safe for the administration of these essential services. When we see examples of that coming from individuals – this individual explained it to me very clearly, that people's lives are put into danger by messing with the, as she put it, emergency system that she's a part of.

9:30

Madam Speaker, that's quite unconscionable, quite frankly. You know, then when I looked at the extra costs that are being downloaded as a result of the change in the MSI from this legislation, again, having a premium, I was astounded to see a premium put onto people's cellphones to pay for this cut by this provincial UCP government.

I know that different municipalities – oh, you must be feeling the pressure on the other side, because the city of Lethbridge made very explicit today that it wanted nothing to do with this change to the dispatch aspect to Alberta emergency services. They said: "We run and we know our localities. We know the streets. We know the backstreets and the alleys and how to get to the place in the very fastest time, and running a system like that out of Calgary for a city like Lethbridge literally puts people's lives in danger." I don't think that, Madam Speaker, there's any more explicit way to describe just how unreasonable this legislation is in its current form and how it would be reasonably amended by moving forward and leaving it for either committee work or for reflection over the next six months to just wait for things to cool off a bit and to look for more reasonable ideas to be put forward.

We have so many testimonials from municipalities around the province describing in detail how this legislation and this last budget have compromised their ability to do infrastructure maintenance and renewal of essential services and of bridges and roads and so forth, how the cuts through the budgets and through this change through this legislation have compelled municipalities to talk about continuing municipal tax increases, having more user fees and so forth, and making life generally more expensive for Albertans right across this province.

Madam Speaker, I think that this reasoned amendment is the best way to go, and I would urge all of our colleagues and members on the other side to consider voting in favour of it.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate on amendment RA1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It's an honour to rise again this evening to speak to Bill 56, the Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. Of course, we have before us an amendment that would, once again, ensure that this legislation be not now read a second time because the Assembly is of the view that municipalities cannot sustain the reduction in funding proposed by the bill without making substantial cuts to services or substantial increases to property taxes.

Once again, I would thank the Member for Lethbridge-West for bringing this important amendment forward. I have appreciated the comments of my colleagues so far this evening. It's always important to hear from all elected officials in this House, so I appreciate that they've brought the concerns of their constituents and from constituents outside of their own boundaries forward, something that we expect of all members, of course. I'm very thankful to hear how those conversations have went with those MLAs and their community stakeholders.

It's quite clear from what we're hearing here today that this piece of legislation should not proceed based on the comments that have been brought forward by a variety of stakeholders across the province. We've heard from the president of the AUMA, the president of the RMA. Once again, when we look at some of our big-city mayors, the mayor of Calgary said – when this legislation was rolled out and when we started to hear about the MSI cuts being proposed by this UCP government, the mayor went on to say: on the one hand they want us to build stuff and create jobs, but on the other hand they want to take away the money we need to build stuff and create jobs. Quite a succinct statement I would say.

Once again, when we look at the situation that we're in, Madam Speaker, right now more than ever I would argue that we need these important investments in our communities. We've heard from a variety of stakeholders and from members, again, this evening that have brought forward those concerns – and I'm very thankful that somebody in this House is willing to bring forward those concerns, because if we took the government at their word, everything is going to be perfect as this bill rolls out. “Nothing to see here. Don't worry about the funding commitments that we're going back on since the election, since we were in opposition from 2015-2019. Everything's good to go, and municipalities are happy with these changes or understanding.” But the fact is that when we look at the statements that have been made from stakeholders across the province, nothing could be further from the truth, and I'm sure that you've heard from your own constituents that they are concerned with this legislation.

When we looked at the comments from the mayor of Edmonton, Don Iveson, he explained that he was deeply concerned with the cuts not only to the city funding in this budget but also to partner postsecondary institutions. When we reflect on other changes that this government has made, you know, our postsecondary institutions are getting hit from either side, not only on the funding from the provincial side, but they're also being forced to raise tuition for students in our communities. At the same time as we have our provincial government explaining that there's not enough funding for important infrastructure, for important services in our community, at that same time, they're also saying that we don't have that funding for our postsecondary institutions, and it really is going to have a cumulative effect on our communities.

In the midst of a pandemic we should be doing everything we can to support those postsecondary institutions to ensure that we aren't experiencing what many would call brain drain, but unfortunately this government seems to have very little concern for that fact. You know, once again, we're seeing facilities in our postsecondary institutions and faculties on the chopping block. We've seen many lose those positions already, and unfortunately, that kind of institutional knowledge is not something that we can bring back as easily as we can cut it. Now, whoever the next government is is going to have to deal with the short-sightedness of this government. I suppose you might just call it the nature of politics, but the fact is that it is going to cost us much more to ensure that we can contain that institutional knowledge, to contain concerns about brain drain, and this government, once again, has very little concern for that.

Just, once again, reflecting on what the mayor of Edmonton spoke about, or said, in reference to MSI funding cuts, he went on to say: “It's very disheartening, and not just for Edmonton but the future prospects of cities in this province of all sizes. It's layer after layer after layer, and it just really constrains what the city can do even on basic maintenance, which is a job creator.” So not only do we have municipalities saying that they can't fund important infrastructure projects, important projects that would sustain jobs in our province and build new infrastructure and new services, but we can't even maintain and sustain the maintenance, the basic maintenance in our municipalities.

Now I know that quite often we hear – whether we're municipally elected or provincially, it often comes to our office – the concern about neighbourhood renewal and maintenance of roads and our arterial roadways in our cities. Unfortunately, the mayors of our major cities and of our rural municipalities have laid it out quite clearly that, with the funding that this government is providing, basic maintenance is not going to be sustainable. It's incredibly unfortunate, Madam Speaker. When we look at the cuts that are being proposed – you know, we listen to the government talk about how this money is front-ended, so if a municipality makes the decision to invest in infrastructure – I hope they still are having those discussions; I know they are, but they're also concerned about what happens the years following – as we look at trying to sustain, maintain, and staff those new facilities that are hopefully being built across our province, they aren't going to have the funding for those new facilities, because the fact is that they don't have the funding today for the facilities that are already in our communities.

9:40

Once again, very short-sighted decisions from this provincial government. They are continuing to spend money on frivolous things like the energy war room – we've heard that several times this evening and over the last several months – an organization that has zero transparency in a ministry and with a minister who isn't willing to bring the numbers to the table and assure us that that money is being spent responsibly and to the best benefit of all Albertans.

Now, there's another piece of this conversation, which I believe has been commented on to some extent this evening, about how cuts to MSI are going to also compile on cuts to CIP and CFEP for our municipalities. We have heard, whether it be community leagues, whether it be nonprofits, that the cut, amounting to over 50 per cent of a budget, for organizations in our municipalities, whether it be, once again, community leagues, nonprofits like EndPovertyEdmonton, organizations that are focused on building affordable housing or supportive living facilities – that money is also being cut. What was the answer that we were provided by the minister in charge of that funding? There is a one-time payment rolling out to these organizations if they are lucky enough to get that funding in the first place.

Madam Speaker, just like we saw in the child care subsidies, that were previously \$25 a day – of course, our government had plans to expand that across the province. Of course, the UCP came in and completely axed that program. Hundreds of millions of dollars sat in that minister's budget unspent, and their answer to the thousands of Albertans who came forward to say that the new plan or lack of a plan is not supporting Albertans was, just like we see in CIP and CFEP, to provide a one-time payment.

I would also commend the critic on this file for bringing forward the fact that these one-time payments would have been enough to sustain something like a \$25-a-day child care program for several years moving forward instead of a very unscientific process of just handing a one-time payment back to these facilities and to these

providers and to these families with children that are accessing these services. A one-time payment: a minuscule amount compared to what that minister should be investing in child care in the middle of a pandemic, when we should be doing our best to heighten the level of standards across the province. We've seen the exact opposite from this minister.

Whether it's on this file, on Bill 56 and MSI funding cuts, whether it's on child care, whether it's on cuts to CIP and CFEP, this government continues to say one thing but does the complete opposite. It's hard because we see it day in and day out, and it becomes harder and harder for Albertans to listen to the direction and the messages coming from this government and take it at face value. When a government loses the ability to keep the trust of Albertans, then we have a whole other issue on our hands. It really seems to be the case. The fact is that on many of these issues even more recently it seems like even the government members, the caucus members within the government, don't trust the direction of this Premier, so how is the Premier and the government supposed to go out and tell Albertans one thing and have them believe that when their own caucus doesn't believe it?

There's a lot of work to do on this front, Madam Speaker. For the benefit and the sake of my community I hope that this government is up for the challenge, but at this point it doesn't seem to be the case. We are seeing community groups such as community leagues, nonprofits who are providing subsidized or lower cost food options for people in our community – we are seeing these organizations falling apart. We are seeing them lose their funding. We are seeing them unable to further provide these services that they've provided for so many years. It's truly disheartening to see that these organizations that have supported our communities for so, so long, because of the direction of this government, simply have no future and have no hope on the horizon. Unfortunately, what that is going to mean, when these organizations begin to disappear from our communities, is that that cost is going to go back to the provincial government. Once again, when we talk about the short-sightedness and the decisions that this government is making to try, I guess, what you might call balancing a budget, the fact is that they really haven't had any movement on that compared to when we were in government.

Yet what are we getting, Madam Speaker? Once again, \$30 million on a war room and the energy cap removed as Albertans and my constituents are being hit with \$500 utility bills. Now, they made the good decision, the right decision, to temporarily freeze – excuse me – to put in place deferrals. But all of these deferrals that Albertans have been hit by are now coming to an end, and this government has no direction for those Albertans who cannot afford to pay for their current utility bills, not to mention the deferred utility bills that were done so previously.

Unfortunately, Madam Speaker, while Albertans struggle, while community leagues and community nonprofits and municipalities struggle, I really am not sure who is doing better. When I think of who is doing better because of the decisions of this government, I can only think of one group, and it's lobbyists. How have we gotten to a place, as representatives of our community, where we're only concerned about the vision and the comments of lobbyists? While our municipalities are struggling to pay for basic infrastructure and basic maintenance and are laying off thousands of front-line workers, I guess the lobbyists are doing all right. Maybe that is a win in this Premier's books. I'm not sure.

The point is, Madam Speaker, as we look at Bill 56 and the amendment before us that this legislation should not now be read a second time, put forward by the Member for Lethbridge-West, I am fully in support of that. The fact is that we have laid out this evening and quite often before that people like the president of the AUMA,

like the president of the RMA, like the mayors of Calgary and Edmonton and Cochrane town councillors and the Reeves of communities like Vulcan and Fort Saskatchewan – many of these people are the people that the government side, the government caucus, is supposed to represent. What happened here? Where was the disconnect from when you were elected and you made these commitments, commitments like MSI funding, like ensuring indexing AISH and other important community supports, like supporting our communities through programs like CFEP and CIP? Where was the disconnect between when you were elected on those very important programs and those platforms and where we are today?

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I'd like to take this opportunity to remind all members to direct their comments through the chair.

We are now at Standing Order 29(2)(a). I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and ask my friend and colleague the Member for Edmonton-West Henday to further expound on one of the topics he spoke about tonight. I appreciate his comments regarding the amendment to Bill 56, referring it to committee. One of the things I'd like to hear more from the member is around the surprise increase on cellphone bills for the 911 service. I'm hoping to hear from the member, recognizing that he represents a riding here in the city of Edmonton. However, all members of the Chamber receive correspondence from Albertans throughout the province. You know, on that note, Madam Speaker, I think it's important to remind Albertans that although we are elected within our own ridings, I believe that we represent all Albertans, and it's our job as elected representatives to listen to the voices of the people of the province.

9:50

It's similar in municipal politics, where I appreciate that city councillors have boundaries, but I would argue with any city councillor that says to an Edmontonian or a Calgarian: "Oh, don't talk to me. Go talk to somebody else. Sorry; I don't represent you." Now, they may not vote for that individual councillor. However, two arguments can be made: one, voting boundaries are imaginary lines that actually shift, at least provincially, every two elections. I think it is incumbent upon elected representatives, as provincially elected officials, to hear the opinions of those in the province of Alberta. I know I've heard of examples – believe me; I get e-mails – from folks who have written my office to say: "I've tried to write my own MLA. They refuse to answer my e-mail or respond to my concerns. Will you?" And the answer is yes.

I know that the Member for Edmonton-West Henday has heard from Albertans from all corners of the province regarding this UCP government's ideological drive to consolidate the 911 service, despite the fact that evidence has indicated that response times will be increased and costs are going up. I would love to hear the Member for Edmonton-West Henday comment further on what he's heard from his constituents and other Albertans on this issue.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and I appreciate the comments and the question from the member. The fact is, without getting into any details, that when we look at this bill and the fact that this government is going to force municipalities to take on the burden of \$41 million, that is, at the end of the day, a tax increase on Albertans. There's no other way to explain that or for that to play

out. This government was elected on a campaign to not raise any taxes, but we've seen time and time again and in this bill that the government is doing the exact opposite.

When it comes to the consolidation of these services across our province, I think it speaks for itself that there are members of the government who quietly, very quietly go back into their community and say, "I don't support what our government's doing," but when it comes time to vote, either they will support this piece of legislation like they have other pieces of legislation to consolidate these services, or they won't vote at all, potentially. I would never venture to say who that might be, Madam Speaker, but the record will show who stood up for their communities when it came to the consolidation of these services or speaking out against.

We've seen on a number of fronts, more recently, unfortunately, several members of the government speaking out against very real health measures that were put in place to support the health and well-being of Albertans. We saw that the government caucus stepped out of line with what the Premier has been saying.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, any members wishing to speak to amendment RA1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my privilege to rise tonight to speak to the amendment that would ask that we delete all words after "that." I think that when we're looking at this piece of legislation, what I'm hearing over and over is that there are a lot of elected officials from municipalities all across the province that are saying that this doesn't make sense. This is one more thing that this government is doing that is dismantling their ability to provide supports, resources, infrastructure, to their communities. Who lives in those communities, Madam Speaker? Albertans.

I can tell you that I'm a born and raised Albertan. I lived in Spruce Grove, born at the Royal Alex, followed my dad. He was working for Calgary Power and TransAlta. We moved to Whitecourt, and that's where I spent most of my childhood. I can tell you that as a child growing up in small-town Whitecourt at the time, we were actively involved as a family within the community. We went to the public swimming pool. I took tennis lessons at the tennis courts. We had birthday parties at the community centre. We played in hockey tournaments all across northern Alberta, whether it was in Edson or Sangudo or Barrhead.

So many of my childhood memories are being actively involved in communities all across this beautiful province. Family weddings that took place in Onoway or Spruce Grove or Black Diamond. Baseball tournaments that were put on by the community. I remember being little and going to a red-eye and just being so excited that my parents were playing a baseball game that lasted the whole weekend, and we got to stay up. That was an event that was put on by the community. It was in Bruderheim, and it brought in so many other communities to come together to celebrate.

I think some of the facilities that I attended as a child, whether it was a cousin's wedding or an aunt's baby shower, are in desperate need of upgrades. They are in desperate need of repairs. To think that we have a government that is not supporting communities and gathering spaces that so many in this room have experienced. My kids played hockey, so we've done hockey tournaments all over Alberta. We've always stopped faithfully in Nanton at the candy store and get ice cream. It's part of my childhood, and it's part of my children's childhood, travelling this beautiful province that we have. The countless baby showers and weddings and family reunions that we've done in these small communities that need our help.

They're asking. Community leaders are coming to this government and saying: please don't do this; the cuts that we've already been given are putting our communities at risk. The infrastructure that they have is crumbling. To think that some of these spaces that I grew up enjoying as a child, as a teenager, as an adult might not be available, that these communities might actually cease to exist is devastating. We have such a beautiful province. We have so many people that want to come together. They want to create pride in their community, and the number one way to do that is to invest in your community. If you have facilities that are renovated, people are going to have weddings there.

I might not live in Whitecourt anymore, but when I go for a school reunion – I won't say what year it would be – I want to be able to do it in Whitecourt, in their community hall. I don't want to have to travel to a different town because Whitecourt didn't have the funding to support their community buildings. I want to be able to show my kids where I grew up and say that this is where I played; this is where I had a dance tournament. Those things, as you get older, you start telling those stories over and over and over to your kids. My kids are starting to do that: oh, remember, Mom, when we went to Vulcan, or remember when we went to Glendon and we looked at the giant perogy, and we have photos of the Easter egg? Like, these are things that communities have done to stand out in Alberta, to create travel and tourism in the province. We did a summer where we did a road trip, and we tried to hit as many of the world's largest that we could.

They didn't believe me when I said that there was a UFO landing pad in Alberta, and that was the community of St. Paul, that said that this is something that we want to do to demonstrate to other Albertans or people driving through to come and visit our community. If those infrastructure pieces aren't invested in, they're going to lose that ability. When you go to St. Paul, they have a community that's built around the landing pad. They have a pizza place that's called UFO Pizza, and I have to say that it has the best donair pizza that I've ever had. When you have communities that are so proud in whatever it is that they're known for, the whole community comes together to support that. When we're putting funding at risk for some of these municipalities, there's a huge problem when this government isn't listening. These are human experiences. These are Albertans' livelihoods. These are their homes. These are the places that they return to to show their kids.

10:00

We have community leaders all across the province saying, "Please pay attention to us; invest in us; we matter; we want to belong; we want to contribute; we want to be able to invest in our swimming pools, in our recreational facilities, in our walking paths," something that right now in the middle of COVID, where people can't get together and they can't socialize – people are isolated. They're stuck at home. Why wouldn't you want to invest in nature trails around the community? There are some beautiful walking paths in Alberta. There are opportunities to go – I remember going with my dad and him pointing out different flowers, different edible things. It was safe to do that, and it's safe to do that in COVID, but if you're not investing in the communities and the municipalities, those experiences are at risk.

We've heard over and over different quotes from different municipal leaders desperate for this piece of legislation to not go through, so when I see this amendment that says that we just stop, that it "be not . . . read a second time because the Assembly is of the view that municipalities cannot sustain the reduction in funding proposed by the bill without making substantial cuts to services or substantial increases to property taxes," those aren't the words of us. That is coming from leadership all around the province, elected

representatives from municipalities, from communities like Whitecourt, like Spruce Grove, like Turner Valley, all of those places that I grew up experiencing, that my kids have grown up experiencing, that every one of the members in this Legislature represents.

I'm just confused how members opposite, Madam Speaker, can stand in the Chamber and speak in support of this. I know that there are so many communities that are pleading with our side of the House to stop the changes because their members aren't listening. They're getting up, and they're speaking their keynote, their key messages. They're not representing the voice of those that we're hearing from. They're pleading to stop the cuts, to give them the ability to be able to invest in infrastructure, to be able to invest in roads.

My family on my dad's side: they were farmers from Sangudo, from Alberta Beach. They did ranching, bull farming, and a lot of them have heavy, heavy equipment that is required to use the roads. If we're not investing in our secondary highways or our back roads, those farmers' livelihoods are at risk. If they can't transport their heavy machinery or their product, they're at risk. We're hearing from them, saying: you need to continue to invest; we need to continue to look at the infrastructure that we support as a municipality. That means roads, not just buildings but actual roads, to be able to get their product in a timely manner where it needs to go.

[The Speaker in the chair]

When we are asking for this amendment to be considered, I'm asking all members of this Chamber to truly think about what their constituents are asking for and what they're telling them because what we're hearing on this side of the House, that the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview talked about, is that the average person that's reaching out to us isn't necessarily from our own constituencies. I absolutely hear from constituents from Edmonton-Castle Downs, but I also hear from constituents all across the province talking about their concern with the cuts, and right now we're hearing and I know the government is hearing from municipal leaders – mayors, Reeves, city councillors – begging for this piece of legislation to not go through.

They've already seen so many cuts. They're telling this government what is going to happen. They are at risk. They have so many municipalities in the rural communities that are struggling with millions of dollars of unpaid property taxes. They have infrastructure that's crumbling. They're talking about these unintended consequences. When you have a government that isn't supporting municipalities, that means they're not supporting the people in those communities. It's going to force the municipalities to increase property taxes. It's going to force them to make substantial cuts to services that they rely on. If they're not going to listen to the opposition – we've seen a trend in this Legislature – we're asking that they listen to all of those municipal leaders that have been very clear that this bill is not supportive of municipalities. It downloads more cost onto them. It has taken away significant funding to their budgets, which forces them to make cuts to services that all Albertans rely on, and they don't want to do that. They're struggling.

This is a time where the whole province, the whole country is dealing with a global pandemic, and Albertans are not exempt from that struggle. People are being laid off. This is a government that promised more jobs. The municipalities are saying: we can create more jobs; we need money invested in infrastructure where we can pay our people to come and fix roads and fix those community centres that are in desperate need of revitalization. You want the

economy to be supportive of jobs, yet you're not giving the money to the municipalities where those jobs can be created. I believe that it was Mayor Nenshi that spoke about that, had said to the *Calgary Herald*: on the one hand, they want us to build stuff and create jobs, but on the other hand they want to take away the money we need to build stuff and create jobs.

Very simply put, Mr. Speaker, this government on one hand is saying that they want to create jobs – they're looking at the municipalities and the leadership in the communities to do those things – but then they're not actually providing the supports and resources that are required to do those things. They're taking that funding away. They're reducing the MSI, which is a complete contradiction to actually being able to create jobs. If you want to create jobs, the municipalities are saying: "We want to help. We're here. We have projects that are ready to go. But when you cut our funding, we can't actually invest in that, so we have to take away more services that our constituents, our community rely on on top of taking away potential good-paying jobs."

It just doesn't make sense when we're looking at all of these leaders that are coming forward expressing concern, and this government just isn't listening, so we're asking, with this amendment, that it not be read a second time. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or comment. The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was struck by a couple of things that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs brought forward with a very impassioned sort of survey of the importance of municipalities to building community, you know, the first of which was Whitecourt. Quite frankly, I think Whitecourt is a very good example of a town that was very much resource based, but a conscious decision was made, probably around the time when your family had moved there and was just growing up, to try to not just have people going there and working in camps but, rather, working and then building a community that's adjacent to the forest industry and the pulp and paper industry, that kind of formed the nucleus of the town.

10:10

You know, I haven't spent a lot of time there, but I certainly can see it as almost a similar development history to Hinton, Alberta – right? – where you had the pulp and paper industry built there, so it wasn't just a place to perhaps have people working in work camps and working in the bush and whatnot, but you could have your family there. The way that you could attract people to have their family there is to have that municipal infrastructure that would allow the kids to go to school and have an ice rink and have nice parks and all of the things that make quality of life improve to the point where people want to live in a place.

Madam Speaker, I think that we're at a juncture here now where we can look at that same model and make sure that we go back to that future, go back to that place where we are building community and building affordable communities for people to live in, right? We're seeing an interesting phenomenon – not Madam Speaker; Mr. Speaker, I apologize – where, you know, even though we're in an economic downturn and there's COVID, real estate prices are flying through the roof across different parts of our province, and it's very hard for young families to get a foothold into a mortgage that would allow them to have a home and then settle in like that, right?

Municipalities, especially in the sort of suburban communities around Edmonton and Calgary, for example, need an investment to build that affordable infrastructure for families to be able to carry on with their dreams and aspirations for creating families and community for the next generation. It's as simple as that. You need to nurture that, which, of course, will give you an exponential growth and increase to your economy by putting in the seed money of building that infrastructure so that it's there for people to use and have an affordable community, right? You know, you see it all over the province. Another town of – let's say, for example, Blackfalds, just outside of Red Deer. It just grew up out of the prairie – well, I guess it took a number of years – a remarkable growth of a suburban community outside of Red Deer that was nurtured and was allowed to grow like that because there was a municipal investment in recreation facilities, in schools and all of the sewers and roads and whatnot that you need for a modern suburban community to grow.

Always you've got to look two steps ahead, Mr. Speaker, when you are building for the future, and that's what our job is in this place, to look not just now and say, "Oh, it's an economic downturn; let's cut everything" – you know, scorched earth, right? – but play the next five or 10 years down the road and look for what you will do to attract and nurture that new economy to grow and to prosper. The key is to make sure you are investing in young families, affordability, and the infrastructure that comes from municipal development right across this province, not just in Edmonton and Calgary but in a place like Blackfalds or in Whitecourt or in Hinton, Alberta, right? All of these are towns and municipalities that have families, and we want young families to grow and to prosper in those places every step of the way.

Again, a very reasonable amendment, I think, to pull back on a very unpopular and, I think, poorly conceived bill. I encourage everyone to make that choice to support this reasoned amendment here this evening.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the time allotted for 29(2)(a).

Is there anyone else who would like to speak to amendment RA1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm slightly surprised that you had to look down to see my riding title.

The Speaker: To see if you already spoke.

Mr. Bilous: Ah. Fair enough. For those at home, the Speaker, ever on his toes, was looking to see if I've spoken to RA1, but I have not. So it's my pleasure to rise and speak to this reasoned amendment. For those following at home, what this amendment would do is postpone the second reading of this bill to six months hence. No, it would not do that. What it would do is delete all of the words after "that" and substitute the following, which would essentially amend this bill so that more work can be done.

You know, Mr. Speaker, as I was listening to two of my colleagues, the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs and the Member for Edmonton-North West, speaking to this bill – I do want to just offer my appreciation to the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, who always speaks to bills from a position of her values and from a position of her passion. I personally love the fact that she draws on her personal experiences, which is often her children and her family, talking about the impacts of a bill and how she talked about the impacts to her community if the Assembly passes this bill.

I also want to give a shout-out to the Member for Edmonton-North West for his comments on highlighting the argument around quality of life. In fact, Mr. Speaker, his comments triggered a

thought that I haven't spoken about yet. When we talk about municipal investments, which – for those just tuning in at home, the current bill we're debating puts into legislation a significant cut to funding to municipalities that deliver core services around the province. What's interesting is that, once again, this government talks about attracting investment, but their actions do the opposite. Their actions and their financial allocations, or cuts, are actually a hindrance to attracting investment.

You see, Mr. Speaker, the government loves to talk about companies like mCloud and Infosys and how they've decided to invest in Alberta, which is a significant win for Alberta. We thank them for their investment, and we applaud them. In fact, I'd actually like to give credit on Infosys to Calgary Economic Development, who in our term in government worked with them, with Infosys, to initiate conversations. Their diligence and focus and relationship building with a company has led to Infosys's investment in Calgary. I always find it interesting when the current government of Alberta tries to take credit for Infosys's investment when they had little to nothing to do with it. But I applaud Calgary Economic Development, who were the champions who started this.

Mr. Speaker, one of the big attractions or draws for companies, global companies but also local companies, to stay in the province of Alberta is because of our quality of life. The Member for Edmonton-North West triggered this thought in his comments, and I appreciate that. Companies like Infosys have stated that the top reasons for choosing Alberta to invest in are quality of life and access to talent. What drives me crazy is that this government time after time attacks these very reasons that these companies are coming to Alberta. They undermine them. Infosys talks about the quality of life as one of their top reasons for coming to Alberta. Which order of government delivers the grassroots quality of life more than any other government? Municipalities, because they provide the core services that Albertans rely on on a day-to-day basis.

10:20

I'm not saying that municipalities are more important than the provincial government or more important than the federal government. They're all important. But Albertans touch, feel, experience the services delivered by municipalities more than any other order of government. I'm happy to get into a debate with folks on that. That's my experience. That's also the experience of every single councillor, mayor, or reeve that I've ever spoken with.

You have an example of a company like Infosys coming to Alberta based on quality of life, and here in this bill the government is gutting municipalities who help deliver on quality of life. What boggles my mind, Mr. Speaker, is that the government of Alberta, this UCP government, talks about attracting investment in one breath and in the other breath knocks the legs out from the very agencies or organizations or orders of government that are helping to deliver on that. Their second reason for coming to Alberta, Infosys, is access to talent. This was weeks before the government released its budget, which guts postsecondaries. Like, I really wish the folks on the other side of the House would put these together. You're cutting municipalities, who provide core services that impact quality of life. You're making cuts to our education system. I'm sorry, maintaining funding is a cut. You know that, and if you don't know that, then you need to do your homework, because there's something called inflation, which increases the costs on everyone year to year. In addition, in our education system you have 30,000 new students joining our schools every fall, so when you don't increase funding, it's a cut. You don't believe me? Don't believe me. Go ask a teacher. In fact, the reality . . .

An Hon. Member: The other teachers.

Mr. Bilous: I am a teacher. But I'm saying: ask a teacher who's currently in the system.

. . . that is facing our teachers is abhorrent. It's beyond upsetting. In this bill, talking about municipalities, if you don't see the connection between cuts to municipalities, cuts to postsecondaries, cuts to education, attacking doctors, and picking fights with our health care system, then you don't get it.

You know, I appreciate that this government is applauding and lauding technology companies and investment that has come to Alberta. I encourage the government to look at the fact that, yes, in 2020 there had been a substantive increase in venture capital investments. That's not because of you. Those investments are the critical work that organizations like the Alberta Enterprise Corporation have done. It takes years to attract and build those funds. I'm not attributing it to our government. I'm saying that these take years.

The frustration is that you applaud these companies that are investing in Alberta, but they're not doing it because of you; they're doing it despite you. You're putting up obstacles and challenges in front of these companies, and they're finding innovative ways to work around the government of Alberta. The fact that we still have a growing interactive video game industry: I applaud all of the entrepreneurs for doing it because they are working uphill. Other provinces across the country have incredible incentives to attract these companies, and the problem is we are losing talent to these other provinces.

I also find it completely hypocritical that some tax credits are okay according to the government, and others are framed as picking winners and losers. You can't have it both ways even though you've tried to do that. I also love the fact that many of the members on that side of the House voted against incentives for the petrochemical industry time and time again, and now suddenly because the investments are in the billions the government is like: this is a great idea.

In this bill – the reason I'm supporting this amendment is because the proposed cuts to municipalities are bad for a host of reasons, but in this speech of mine I've been focusing on the impact to industry, the impact to attracting investment, the impact to incenting and keeping Alberta companies here in the province. When you take away funding to municipalities, the very entity and order of government that's responsible for our roads, for our local on-the-ground logistics, which impact every single business, you're in fact hurting our ability to attract investment and retain and grow companies here in the province. This bill, should it pass in this Legislature, Mr. Speaker, will hurt Alberta's ability to attract investment and retain and grow our very companies because they rely on municipal infrastructure no matter where they are in the province.

You know, Mr. Speaker, if the government of Alberta was coming to the Legislature with a proposal to replace MSI, then I think the opposition would look at that with an open mind and weigh the pros and cons of the new program. The reality is that, once again, this government is making ideological decisions, cutting MSI before they actually have a program in place to represent it. Does this sound familiar? Let's see. The Alberta investor tax credit, the interactive digital media tax credit, a number of programs that were working to support Alberta businesses attract investment and increase employment in the province: the government made an ideological decision to gut it, and then there was a vacuum of 18 months before any program was put forward at a fraction of the amount under the NDP government.

Mr. Speaker, I cannot support this bill because the government has not put forward any reasons for these massive cuts other than

hurting Alberta entrepreneurs and jobs and attracting investment in this province.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a).

Seeing none, are there others wishing to speak to the amendment?

[Motion on amendment RA1 lost]

The Speaker: We are at second reading of Bill 56. Is there anyone wishing to speak to second reading? The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall has risen.

10:30

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to the second reading of Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. I think we've heard from my colleagues about this bill, how this bill will impact municipalities. It's simply implementing hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts to municipalities. These cuts will add up. The cumulative impact of these cuts will be that people will pay more in property taxes, people will see cuts in their services, and it will threaten the viability of municipalities. This bill also forces municipalities to pay another \$41 million in 911 upgrades, with no support from the province. The timing of these costs couldn't be worse. I think the municipalities don't support it, and we're not able to support it.

With that, I move that we adjourn debate on this bill.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 55

College of Alberta School Superintendents Act

[Debate adjourned April 6]

The Speaker: Is there anyone wishing to join? The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise again this evening, this time to speak to Bill 55, the College of Alberta School Superintendents Act. Now, in general this bill does not seem to be controversial. Fairly straightforward: the creation of a new regulatory college within the province of Alberta for school superintendents, a professional college, and this would include our educational superintendents, our deputy superintendents, whether they're in the public, separate, or francophone school authorities.

As with most colleges they would be responsible, then, for professional development, setting learning requirements for its members. Fairly straightforward. It allows them to police themselves. They would have some opportunities to, I guess, have a disciplinary committee to look over if there were any accusations of serious misconduct. Of course, it would be within the control of the minister to then determine what precisely would be done with that individual. The committee would make recommendations regarding suspension or having a professional certificate revoked. This would also remove the power or responsibility that the minister currently has, however you want to view it, of approving the superintendent contracts with school boards.

My understanding is that this is the request that had been put forward by superintendents, that they had made this request to the minister. They had asked this government to create this college. It's interesting to me the issues in education on which this government chooses to listen to the people of Alberta. Certainly, I can respect that they felt it was worthwhile to listen to superintendents, but I would note that this government has not seen fit to listen to many Alberta teachers, principals, other educational staff who have called

for much more support for our schools in the midst of this global pandemic.

It's interesting to me what this government chooses to prioritize in terms of bringing forward bills to do with education and indeed supports, what it chooses to act on, what it chooses to prioritize at a time when we have such incredible disruption in our education system, thanks in large part to decisions this government itself has made such as choosing to lay off over 20,000 educational staff via social media at the beginning of the pandemic last year, March of last year, just over a year ago. Now, you'd think their priority, Mr. Speaker, would be to be getting some of those folks back in the classroom at a time when teachers could use that support more than ever. Perhaps that would be a way to help reduce class sizes, to help provide a safer work environment, particularly as we see the spread of these far more virulent variants of concern.

Instead, what we have in front of us today is Bill 55, creating a new regulatory college, which in itself, as I said, is not necessarily a bad thing, but it certainly is an odd priority at a time when at a single school in Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock we have, to my understanding, 100 students who have been impacted by COVID-19. Now, interestingly, the MLA for Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock nonetheless feels that we should be lifting public health restrictions at this time despite the fact that he has this happening in his backyard, impacting so many students and individuals, and his area being one of the top areas in the province per capita for new COVID cases. His government instead brings forward Bill 55 to create a new College of Alberta School Superintendents.

Now, we haven't heard, at least to the best of my knowledge, specifically from many school superintendents about the new curriculum, which is another odd priority that this government is pushing through at a time when they are causing other disruption. Now, of course, their priority here seems to be creating a new College of Alberta School Superintendents. They are listening to them.

But, of course, they are not listening to the over 90 per cent of teachers who have expressed that they have no faith in this government's curriculum or the now going on 13 school boards who have said that they will not pilot it because it is so incredibly flawed, age inappropriate, ideological. This government's priority is not to listen to them; it is to override them. It is to claim that they have widespread support, that it's not being lambasted across the province, as I believe the Premier said, even though folks see it occurring every day. Instead of the government addressing that issue, we are here tonight debating Bill 55, the creation of a college of school superintendents.

Indeed, one might say that this is about as relevant to Albertans right now as, you know, the Holy Roman Empire and Charlemagne to students in grade 2, but of course that is what the government considers to be a priority right now for moving forward. One might say that this is about as relevant as the social studies curriculum, really, that they're looking to force through, which is incredibly age inappropriate. This seems to be an inappropriate focus, I would say, at a time when schools are already struggling, struggling with having to deal with not only the global pandemic and not only the over 20,000 educational staff that this government laid off, the majority of whom never found themselves back in a classroom due to, of course, this government's educational cuts, which they will deny but that we know exist and that every school board in the province will tell you exist and that every teacher who is dealing with the implications of that in their classroom will tell you exist.

This government's priority is to introduce Bill 55 and create a College of Alberta School Superintendents, which tends to be what we see from this government. They're not paying attention to

everyday Albertans. They're not paying attention to the actual implications and effects of their cuts. They're not paying attention to the actual damage this is doing to so many. They are not paying attention to the hundreds of Alberta families who are forced into isolation because their child has been involved in a situation where they were exposed to COVID-19 in their school, even as the new, far more virulent variants of concern are spreading rapidly, having now become the dominant strain in the province because, again, this government chose to sit on its hands and instead prioritize things like bringing forward Bill 55, the College of Alberta School Superintendents Act.

10:40

There are so many things this government could be doing right now to make a better school system, Mr. Speaker, to be supporting students and parents, to be supporting teachers as opposed to laughing at them, as we saw the Premier and others do earlier today, deriding their elected representatives who speak on their behalf.

Mr. Schow: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: A point of order is called. The hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika.

Point of Order Imputing Motives

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are getting later in the evening, and I would like to get this, you know, continued debate in what I think would be a friendly, orderly manner. But to suggest that the Premier, which the Member for Edmonton-City Centre just noted, was laughing at teachers today, I think, would be a mischaracterization. Had he suggested that the government caucus or members of the government were laughing at teachers might be, maybe, a little more parliamentary, I guess, based on precedents that I've noticed, rulings on points of order, but to suggest that the Premier was laughing at teachers would be imputing false motives and would be an incorrect assertion inside this Chamber, so I would ask that you ask that member to apologize and maybe clarify what he meant to say if it was indeed something else.

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

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe it's not a point of order. The member was simply referring to an exchange during the question period today. The Leader of the Official Opposition referred to teachers' views about the curriculum and referred to Jason Schilling, the head of the teachers' union, and how 91 per cent of the teachers had rejected this curriculum. I was present here, and the Premier did, in fact, along with other members of the caucus, laugh. That's exactly what my colleague from Edmonton-City Centre was referring to. It's not a point of order. It's something that happened right here, in this Legislature.

The Speaker: I agree that it's not a point of order.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Debate Continued

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can appreciate that the Deputy Government House Leader is perhaps a bit sensitive on the topic.

Mr. Schow: The whip.

Mr. Shepherd: Deputy government House whip. I apologize.

I recognize that government members are a bit sensitive on the topic. They have been ignoring their constituents on this point for some time, instead prioritizing things like the College of Alberta School Superintendents Act, Bill 55, which, I'm sure, not a single one, I'd dare to say, of their constituents has written in with this concern.

I would suggest, then, that perhaps they would consider that, rather than spending the time of this House on this bill, which, again, is in itself innocuous and I suppose will be fine – I don't see any reason why I would oppose it. But I can tell you that certainly from my inbox there are far more Albertans that are concerned about the many ways in which this government is utterly failing our education system, utterly undermining teachers in classrooms both through this global pandemic and the lack of supports and the failures on that front but certainly, even more so, the damage that may well be done in the future should they proceed with their badly flawed curriculum. But that is not the priority the government brings forward. Instead, they prioritize things like Bill 55, the College of Alberta School Superintendents Act, and choose to stand in this place and indeed deny the reality of how Albertans are universally responding to their decisions about our education system.

However, as I said, in general this bill does not fail in the way that so many of this government's other actions on education do, so I suppose that in general this bill will probably meet with my support. But I look forward, certainly, to hearing more from this government about how it intends to repair the serious damage that it has done and is planning to do to our education system.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, are there others wishing to join the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise this evening once again and speak to Bill 55, College of Alberta School Superintendents Act. While it's my first opportunity to speak on this piece of legislation this evening, I have indeed spoken to some extent on it on previous days. But I appreciate the opportunity to rise again, and I appreciate the comments from the previous member, the Member for Edmonton-City Centre. He laid out quite clearly many of my thoughts, most definitely.

But just quickly, while we take a look through this legislation once more, a bit of background and just the idea with this legislation of creating a professional college for educational superintendents and deputy superintendents employed in public, separate, or francophone school systems. Of course, it will lead to, if passed, the opportunity for superintendents and the college to regulate and govern itself accordingly, which we see in many other regulated professions.

It seems to be, for the most part, pretty straightforward, Mr. Speaker, but I have to echo many of the comments of the previous member that, while we are here debating this legislation, which may or may not have been requested by the group of members affected by this legislation through consultation, I can appreciate that and appreciate that we need to move forward on this. But I also hope we can all appreciate the fact that there are many other, as the previous member stated, important topics and opportunities for us to have conversations about the many shortcomings and failures of this government to take action on the very important file that is education in our province.

I think back to, I believe, late July of last year, when our caucus brought forward recommendations, an alternative plan for the

school re-entry plan. Of course, this government at the time, relatively early into the pandemic, showed very little understanding of the circumstances and very little understanding of the impacts that their unwillingness to move on this important file was going to have on our communities. We've seen the situation play out now. The previous member spoke to some extent on that, about certain schools across our province having hundreds of students being affected by COVID-19 and even more families. And that is in certain constituencies alone. Across the province it's thousands upon thousands. Instead of taking swift action, this government, despite the calls of teachers, families, educators, support staff, pretty much everyone other than the government who was calling for support from the UCP, against all of those recommendations simply, Mr. Speaker, did nothing.

Now, at that time we had put forward our alternative plan for school re-entry, and I will to some extent speak to that. One being to set a province-wide cap of 15 students per classroom and hire the necessary staff to accomplish that. Unfortunately, while this initiative was supported by many families and educators across the province and school boards, I might venture to say, we heard crickets from the government, and we saw no action on the opportunity to cap classrooms at 15 or any reasonable number. We saw no movement on that.

Two, Mr. Speaker, hire additional staff to cover paid sick leave and time off to care for sick dependants: once again, no action from this government.

Three, hire additional staff to meet parallel and fluctuating home learning demands. No doubt, many students and families were tasked with deciding whether their children would stay home, whether they would go back into the classroom with an expectation that educational opportunities would not change. With that expectation there was a need for additional funding. Unfortunately, that did not come, Mr. Speaker.

10:50

Four, hire additional custodial staff to ensure schools are cleaned thoroughly and constantly. Mr. Speaker, this list is 15 in total, and these are four now, and, unfortunately, we saw zero movement of any of these initiatives. What did we hear from the minister when we put these forward and when educators and school boards across the province asked for additional funding? The government came back with the talking point that we are reaching historical levels of funding for education, neglecting to point out the fact that there was no new funding for the 20,000 to 30,000 new students each year that were entering classrooms in the K to 12 system, neglecting to point out the fact that there were really zero new supports going to be in place for these students who are entering a classroom in a whole new world.

Five, Mr. Speaker, was to reverse the cuts to student support and rehire the more than 20,000 educational support staff that were laid off at the outset of this pandemic. So not only did this government not add any new funding for the education system, but they actually had the audacity to lay off 20,000 support staff, and this is at the same time that they were clawing back funding for, once again, additional supports for children with extra educational needs, with learning disabilities, who so often get left behind, but thankfully we have systems in place, systems that we need to strengthen. But instead of strengthening those systems, we saw the exact opposite, that in addition to the cuts that had already been put in place under previous budgets, they actually went further in the midst of a pandemic and cut 20,000 additional support staff.

It's hard to understand how we got here, Mr. Speaker. It's hard to understand how you could be the Minister of Education and go in front of students and families and educators day in and day out

and say that you are doing the best that you can. If this is the best that you can do, I would hate to see the worst. The fact is that Albertans were expecting more from this government. They were expecting to see some reprieve from the ideological direction that this government has gone down, but unfortunately we've only seen more of the same, and that's with additional opportunities for funding from the federal government even. Very little of that money has reached classrooms, across the board has reached child care facilities.

When we look at the opportunities for the critical worker benefit, we saw this government at the last minute, at the eleventh hour, come forward to this Legislature and say that we must pass this legislation because they waited until they had about a week, two weeks, left to decide how that money is spent and that we must pass that legislation as soon as possible. But across the board what we've seen from this government is a failure to act, and, unfortunately, when you're a provincial government and you fail to act, in this instance it's costing the well-being of families, and I might venture to say that in some instances it might be costing lives, Mr. Speaker.

We need to ensure that additional funding is in the classrooms. We made this clear in July 2020. We made it clear at the onset of the pandemic that more must be done, but this government sat on its hands, and what we have now is, once again, hundreds of students in one school who have been affected by COVID-19 and thousands and thousands across the province. I find it hard to understand how any member of this Legislature, especially on the government side, could go back to their constituents and say that they've done enough.

The same goes for the draft curriculum that we have before us. Tens of thousands of Albertans have signed petitions across the province stating that this is the wrong direction, that this will not adequately support Albertans, and, unfortunately, once again, the government is not willing to listen to the loud voices of Albertans.

While I appreciate, Mr. Speaker, that we have Bill 55, College of Alberta School Superintendents Act, before us and the importance that these colleges play in their role of regulating and administering these services, the fact is that there are, I would say, very important pieces of legislation that we should be discussing or opportunities to bring forward extra supports in our classrooms that really should be what we're discussing this evening, so it's extremely unfortunate that we are here.

Mr. Speaker, I have heard from so many Albertans who, if they made the decision to keep their children in a classroom, are doing their best to work with educators and school staff to provide their children and those students with the best education possible. But the fact is that when a child has potentially come into contact with COVID-19 and returns to school after that mandatory quarantine and a week later is back in a 14-day quarantine, what are we supposed to tell those families? What are we supposed to tell those students, because of the inaction of this government to do anything?

As per the five points I listed, I would say that, one, a province-wide cap of 15 students per classroom, I think, would have had a measurable impact on the lives and the education of students in our province. I think it's extremely unfortunate that – when we brought this forward, if I remember correctly, it was essentially disregarded completely. There was no willingness from this government to even have that discussion, that it was unreasonable to expect extra funding be provided to our classrooms, that it was unreasonable to expect classrooms to be capped at 15, or any of the points that we made in that 15-point proposal. You know, we went on, point 7, talking about developing best practice guidelines to limit student travel between classrooms.

Mr. Speaker, at the end of the day, when these 15 points came out, the minister said that it essentially wasn't the government's responsibility to take care of these important initiatives; that it was up to the school boards to make these decisions. The fact is that there is no opportunity to make decisions when your hands are tied to provincial funding and the provincial government is not willing to give you an extra dollar for the thousands, tens of thousands, of new students that are entering the classroom.

I think that Albertans will look back on this and look back on the unwillingness to see any movement on the curriculum, the draft curriculum that this government has put forward. I think that it is going to be a defining moment in this government's short history in the province of Alberta, and I think that all UCP MLAs and MLAs on both sides should go back to their constituents and really listen to those concerns because if you don't, I think that it will speak loudly in a couple of short years.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to rise on Bill 55, a second time, I believe, the College of Alberta School Superintendents Act, and I thank everyone for that opportunity.

With that, I'll be seated. Thank you.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate this evening?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 55 read a second time]

Bill 58 Freedom to Care Act

[Adjourned debate March 24: Mrs. Aheer]

The Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn the Assembly until 1:30 p.m. on Tuesday, April 13, 2021.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 10:59 p.m.]

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