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The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday evening, November 15, 2021

Day 125

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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Independent: 2

Vacant: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Monday, November 15, 2021

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 73 Infrastructure Accountability Act

[Adjourned debate November 3: Ms Phillips]

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall has risen.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to the Infrastructure Accountability Act. The name of the bill suggests that it has something to do with accountability, but what we have seen so far and with what we saw this afternoon: where our government can duck accountability, they will do that. Looking at this bill, it's a brief bill. It sets out some criteria that need to be used by ministers while submitting their capital plans and priorities.

The things that are listed there – I think that on this side of the House there are two, three colleagues who have been in cabinet, and they will agree with me that that's how this capital submission process works. As the minister in charge of your file you work with your stakeholders, you work with your department, you identify the priorities, you prioritize those priorities, and you submit it to the minister. You make sure that they align with the programs and services that you're responsible for, that they align with the business plan of your department, that they align with the business plan and priorities of your government. There is no other way of making these submissions. Then if there is something that relates to your constituency, I guess you identify those priorities, make a case, and submit it to your Minister of Infrastructure, and then those priorities are reviewed by the minister, by the public service, and funding is allocated.

There is nothing really new in section 2 that ministers have not been doing. At least that was the case when we were in government. However, since the UCP has been in government, there were major, major capital investments that did not follow anything listed here, and by reading this bill, I'm not sure that even this criteria will be followed in those kinds of investments. I think it will be helpful if the Minister of Infrastructure can rise in this House and tell us how this bill will apply, for instance, to the Keystone XL investment that the government did a couple of years ago now. Essentially, they didn't follow any criteria whatsoever. They were simply betting on President Trump getting re-elected for the White House. That was the only way that project could have moved forward. That resulted in jacking up our debt burden on taxpayers, wasting our taxpayer money, and now I can't see anything in this bill that will help protect Albertans' money in the future.

Section 3 says, "the Responsible Minister shall establish and communicate processes for the preparation and submission of capital planning submissions by Ministers." I think that there is already a process and there always has been a process where you identify the priorities. Those priorities relate to your program and services, relate to your government's overall objectives. That's how infrastructure priorities were identified except for what the UCP did

in the case of investment in Keystone XL, in the case of investment in Redwater refinery. They never shared anything with respect to those projects.

I remember that on this side of the house for months we asked about the details of that deal. We asked about how that money was spent, what's the risk that Albertans are exposed to, and the government never shared anything about that deal, about that infrastructure investment. We asked for their risk analysis, how that decision was made. They refused to share anything. Now the government is putting forward a bill, I think for the most part so that the Minister of Infrastructure can have a bill in his name, but it doesn't change anything. It doesn't assure us that going forward, if this government was to make another investment like Keystone XL, they will be sharing those details with Albertans.

There are some other things as well, criteria for capital planning submissions, and there are a few criteria listed there. Essentially, all of these things are included in those submissions in the cabinet report, why a certain infrastructure project is getting money while others are put on a waiting list. The necessary, I guess, element of those submissions is what economic value they add, what social value they add, what kind of jobs they create, and all of those things, but now they have included something here, "protecting community members and assets from natural disasters." That caught my eye.

On June 13, 2020, there was a natural disaster in northeast Calgary. I think that many MLAs from Calgary-North East, Calgary-Falconridge, even Calgary-Cross will know it was the fourth-largest natural disaster in Canadian history. In the middle of the pandemic when people don't have jobs – they were going through a global pandemic, and we didn't see any kind of help, any protection for the community members or their assets. Their personal property was damaged, their vehicles were damaged, their homes were damaged.

7:40

Mr. Speaker, if you drive through those neighbourhoods, after more than a year you will still see homes that have not been repaired yet, you will still see homes with boarded up windows, and in that quadrant you will still see vehicles that are dented and damaged from that hailstorm. We didn't see any infrastructure support flowing to northeast Calgary from this government. Now they're putting it in this piece of legislation, that they will prioritize "protecting community members and assets from natural disasters." I think it will be helpful if the minister would explain how that will work for my constituents in Calgary-McCall and generally in northeast Calgary.

In short, I would say that increased transparency around infrastructure planning and spending is always welcome but can't be expected from this government, and this bill has some glaring omissions, which must be addressed and fixed. As I said before, this is a government that spent \$1.3 billion on Donald Trump getting re-elected and still refuses to release all the details of that deal. If we're putting forward a bill that is titled the Infrastructure Accountability Act, then Albertans should be able to account for the money that's wasted by this government. This bill doesn't give us the tools to get that kind of accountability from this government, and I think other criteria the government listed here: there is no way for a layperson, for a lay Albertan to see that that's the process the government followed, that's how they identified it. It's still an internal process.

For all these reasons, I think this bill is very short on details. Like many other government bills, it just adds accountability to the title, but it doesn't bring any accountability whatsoever. In the books of history it just puts one piece of legislation in the name of the Infrastructure minister. That's all. If government is serious about accountability going forward in infrastructure projects, then

government should work with us, work with stakeholders, work with Albertans, consult with experts in public finance and accounting and try to improve this piece of legislation.

So far this government's record has been that of secrecy, and they've even been getting awards from across the country. That, so far, is their record. Putting the word "accountability" on a piece of paper doesn't change anything. That's what we saw this afternoon when we were asking this government to hold the Premier accountable for his failure during COVID-19; they didn't.

With that, I move a referral amendment that will refer this bill to Alberta's Economic Future Committee for further consideration.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member. We'll just have the pages come and grab it. Once I have a copy, you'll have 30 seconds remaining should you provide any other additional comments.

Hon. members, this will be referred to as amendment REF1.

Mr. Sabir: In short, Mr. Speaker, for all the reasons I provided earlier – this bill is very vague, short on details, and does nothing to provide accountability for infrastructure projects – I think it's in the best interest of all Albertans that we send this to committee and discuss this further.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, on referral amendment REF1 is there anyone wishing to speak? I see the hon. Member for Calgary-East has risen.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I oppose this amendment for many reasons. I support this bill, and I want to begin by expressing my support for this Bill 73.

I would like to highlight my appreciation to all front-line workers, communities, families, and Albertans that have been patiently working to help reduce the spread of COVID-19, which is affecting all segments of the world. The aim is to always raise awareness and slow the spread. The Alberta government is continuously working firmly on providing COVID-19 updates to ensure our province's families, children, and working Albertans are safe. For that, I express my appreciation to the health care professionals for all their dedication and for taking the initiative and spending countless hours working hard during this time of health crisis.

I would like to applaud the minister for consulting with the MacKinnon panel in advising legislation that would provide a strong government framework for capital planning and formalizing the role of the deputy ministers capital committee.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to extend my appreciation to the major stakeholders such as Calgary Economic Development, Capital Power, and the University of Calgary, that participated in the summer 2020 engagement to propose criteria for the act, as well as to the 3,172 survey submissions and 56 written submissions, including input from the following sectors: energy, health care, schools, municipalities, construction, the postsecondary community, recreation, transportation, technology, agriculture, public safety, finance, and Indigenous communities. The results of this survey identified many key benefits to implement the act with providing more accountability, more transparency, less political bias, and better informed project proposals.

Many members of the municipal governments as well provided input through the survey conducted in summer 2020. Self-reported municipal sector representation accounted for 11 per cent of respondents, the third most represented sector after the community and school sectors. Many written submissions from municipal organizations voiced support for the act and its objectives, including the Rural Municipalities of Alberta, RMA; Alberta Urban

Municipalities Association, AUMA; the city of Calgary; and the city of Edmonton. It was amazing to see that many of the respondents expressed support for the act, including the six prioritization criteria, the governance framework, and the need for long-term capital planning.

7:50

Mr. Speaker, in Alberta the infrastructure sector provides innovative, high-quality, well-designed public structures for Albertans. Through leadership, expertise, and co-operation with partners the ministry provides public infrastructure that contributes to the province's economy and quality of life. The ministry is accountable for the long-term planning of provincial public infrastructure to support key social programs, services, and economic development. The infrastructure sector in Alberta designs, builds, manages, and maintains government-owned and -operated facilities while co-operating with other ministries to ensure that school and health infrastructure meets the needs of all Albertans now and in the future.

Infrastructure is important for faster economic growth and the alleviation of the challenges that are faced within the province. This sufficient infrastructure in the form of roads, railway transport systems, ports, power, airports, and their efficient working is also needed for efficient operations. In addition, infrastructure provides accommodation services and manages a large portfolio of owned and leased facilities while maintaining fiscal accountability and optimizing value for taxpayers. The last couple of years have been most challenging, but with the support of the government investment the resilience of Albertans and their will to rebound will serve as the foundation of Alberta's recovery.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind everyone that the government has been investing in health care capital in Budget 2021, with a commitment of \$3.4 billion over the next three years for health-related capital projects and programs, providing \$2.2 billion, which will be committed to health facilities, with \$141 million for five new projects as well as \$766 million for Alberta Health Services' self-financed capital for parkades, equipment, and other capital requirements, \$343 million for capital maintenance and renewal of existing facilities, and \$90 million for Health department IT projects.

Overall, Mr. Speaker, the 2021 capital plan will invest approximately \$21 billion to build new roads, schools, hospitals over the next three years. As of the first-quarter fiscal update, funding in 2021-22 has increased by over \$2 billion from Budget 2020. The additional funding will support infrastructure projects carefully identified for their potential to support long-term economic growth, with a plan to support more than 50,000 direct and 40,000 indirect jobs. For example, over the past couple of years there has been a tremendous amount of work that has been committed to ensure that long-term job opportunities are created. Such projects in Alberta include the Calgary cancer centre, which is creating approximately 21,000 jobs by 2022.

Throughout Alberta's history the creation of infrastructure in the province has been an inspiring partnership between the various sectors representing who Albertans really are. The coming of the railroads in the late 19th century led to a large-scale movement of farmers and cattlemen from eastern Canada, the United States, and Europe. It was a great opportunity for economic development. Infrastructure makes up our road, transit, and water systems, schools as well as our parks and waste facilities, to name just a few.

Mr. Speaker, before 2019 the government of Alberta had informal criteria that was outlined in an internal capital planning manual, which was a longer list of criteria. Compared to the criteria developed for the act, the criteria used by the previous government

was less focused on economic impacts and did not include elements such as return on investments, life cycle cost, or resiliency. The criteria are no different from what has been used in the last three budgets. Legislating and publicly communicating the prioritization criteria aids transparency around the capital planning process, which stakeholders and Albertans identified as being of great importance during the engagement in the summer of 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 73 will fulfill platform commitments to provide transparency around the process of capital planning and, importantly, will aid in Alberta's recovery plan by supporting jobs and expanding the economy. The Infrastructure Accountability Act will help the government of Alberta in making important capital project investment decisions that will provide Albertans with needed projects. The act will increase transparency for stakeholders and will allow the Treasury Board and cabinet to engage and ensure that strategies around the capital plan match our financial realities of today.

The act demonstrates government's commitment to being transparent, accountable, unbiased when making capital plan decisions. The six criteria in the Infrastructure Accountability Act will evaluate how our capital projects will address health, safety, and compliance needs; align with government priorities and strategies; foster economic activity, create jobs; improve program delivery and services; and consider life cycle costs and whether return on investment is generated. As well, it will ensure community enhancement. Mr. Speaker, to specify, the six criteria proposed in the act, which have been developed with input from the Treasury Board, crossministry engagement, crossjurisdictional research, and stakeholder consultation, have strong support.

The six criteria have been used successfully during the development of Budget 2019, Budget 2020, and Budget 2021. Projects are expected to decrease the risk to the health and safety of Albertans. The strategic alignment should ensure that projects or programs align with the government's strategic objectives. The economic impact is expected to result in positive economic impacts, including direct or indirect job creation and economic development and activity. Program delivery and services are expected to result in the improved delivery of programs and services. The life cycle cost and return on investments are considered to evaluate whether the project or program will generate a return on investment.

Other jurisdictions in Canada such as Ontario and Quebec have similar legislation. Ontario has legislated criteria, and both Ontario and Quebec have legislated the development and review of long-term infrastructure plans. Like Alberta, Ontario and Quebec's legislation focuses on long-term, evidence-based planning and the need for government accountability and transparency. British Columbia and Manitoba do have legislation specific to infrastructure; however, the focus is strictly on transportation.

Within one year of the act coming into force, a 20-year strategic capital plan must be published, which will help with forward planning of all types of public infrastructure. Prudent, purposeful, long-term planning is particularly critical with infrastructure as the effects of these decisions remain for decades to come. The 20-year strategic capital plan will guide the long-term planning for Alberta's infrastructure and promote greater transparency by providing strategic direction beyond the annual capital plan in the budget. This will help inform capital plan decision-making and keep a long-term lens on infrastructure decisions with long-term costs. This is a platform commitment and recommendation of the MacKinnon panel, ensuring that long-term strategic capital planning is the best practice of jurisdictions both within Canada and internationally.

8:00

Mr. Speaker, the Infrastructure Accountability Act reflects input collected from Albertans through surveys and written submissions from various sectors across Alberta. As many respondents expressed support of the act, I as well encourage all the members of this Chamber to support the six prioritization criteria, the governance framework, and the need for the long-term capital planning that is being introduced by Bill 73, the Infrastructure Accountability Act.

Mr. Speaker, the collaboration with partners such as ministries, boards, agencies, industries, and other stakeholders will create jobs and bolster Alberta's economic recovery. Again I will applaud the minister, all the stakeholders, and Albertans that have taken the time to provide feedback to not only better the economy of Alberta but to respect and support the feedback of all our workers and employees.

Once again, I oppose this amendment. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: On amendment REF1, are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday has risen.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise this evening. You know, I was going to stand up and mention – I wasn't sure where the previous member speaking was going to go with that. I think the member got cut off right as they were stating that they won't be supporting the amendment. That's unfortunate. I was waiting for that. I thought it might be a cliffhanger. But I do appreciate those comments. I think there was some leeway given there, so hopefully I would be provided the same amount.

Mr. Speaker, when we look at what we're seeing within this piece of legislation, Bill 73, and why I believe it should go back to committee, that the referral amendment should be accepted, it has been discussed already by some of the members on this side of the House. Just quickly looking at it, even within the preamble we see: "Whereas the Government of Alberta is committed to fostering transparency, predictability and accountability in capital planning processes." Okay. That sounds reasonable and agreeable. We look further: "Whereas the Government of Alberta is committed to infrastructure planning that is long term, priority based and strategic." I mean, again, within the preamble I think that you could find that many members, including myself, on this side of the Legislature could support those initiatives in that preamble.

Unfortunately, we see again and again, Mr. Speaker, whether within this legislation or within the lack of what's in this legislation, that there are concerns when it comes to predictability, when it comes to transparency, when it comes to accountability, and I think that you could look no further than at the KXL decision. The fact is that an investment decision like the one that was made under the Keystone XL pipeline would not be accountable under this legislation. Of course, it wasn't considered a capital project, so it's not affected by this. Just in this one instance we can see why there are going to be concerns in terms of accountability from this government, whether it's written in this instance in legislation or not.

Again, you could look to the war room that this government has set up, spending money to create reports. You know, at the end of the day the government can say what they want about it, but I don't think that the findings of it have been conclusive by any means. It's unfortunate that Alberta taxpayer dollars are footing the bill for this. But, again, when we look back on the idea of accountability and transparency and why this needs to be referred to committee, the fact is that there have been too many decisions that have been made by this government that contradict, that go against the preamble that is even written in this legislation.

The idea that we see within this legislation about a 20-year capital plan: you know, I have thoughts on that. At the end of the day this is quite an extensive plan that this government is proposing. I'm interested to see how they see that coming together. But the fact is that within this legislation itself the government is expressly saying that cost sharing isn't even worth considering. When we're talking about a 20-year capital plan, these are important conversations that we have to have with municipalities, big and small, across the province, conversations that we have to have with the federal government, and unfortunately we don't see that commitment within this legislation.

Again, we have a bill before us, Bill 73, Infrastructure Accountability Act, where I will be hoping we can see support to refer this to committee, because at the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of holes in this legislation, not only when it comes to nothing involving commitments from all levels of government or how we are going to share those capital projects and the costs of them. We don't see a commitment to supporting Indigenous communities or ensuring that First Nations, Métis, Inuit are at the table for these conversations. These are criticisms that continue to happen against this government, that they aren't willing to have real consultations on these important pieces of legislation, and that is why, again, I will be supporting the amendment put forward by the Member for Calgary-McCall to move this to committee.

We see in this legislation a commitment to a 20-year capital plan, but it wasn't long ago, Mr. Speaker, that this government made the decision to go back on their word, something that should be taken very seriously as the governing party in this province, as the party that has the current Premier of the province. The word of the Premier, the word of the government: whether in cabinet or a private member, they should be accountable for what they're saying.

Again, I've raised this point before, that our government, when we were government from 2015 through to 2019, made commitments, went through a rigorous consultation process with our major municipalities, with our big cities, and we came up with a framework around MSI that would ensure that funding is predictable for them so that they can ensure, whether they're considering their tax base or whether they're talking about property taxes or emergency funding, whatever it might be, that they have that predictability.

At that time, Mr. Speaker, again, this current government, when in opposition, supported those changes that we were proposing. Yet a short while after the election happened – and, again, this was in their campaign platform – they went back on that word. They couldn't even stay committed to their own word for a year, yet they're expecting us to believe that we can trust their 20-year capital plan. It's hard to believe.

That's why I do support the referral on the floor, the amendment to Bill 73, the Infrastructure Accountability Act, because I think that this government needs to go back to the drawing board. I think that we need to hear from our municipal counterparts, from our school board counterparts, from Indigenous communities, and from other organizations that are going to be affected by this legislation to hear if they truly believe that their views are represented through this bill.

Now, when we look at some other things that are within this legislation, the idea of the full life cycle cost of a project or a program, whether the project or program will generate a return on investment, is an interesting and important proposal, I imagine, depending on what it is, of course. We don't necessarily expect a K to 12 school to return investment, well, other than the fact that we're raising the next generation of students, Mr. Speaker. The fact is that these are, within this legislation, important things that we should be

considering, but again there are things missing that are so important to ensure that we are getting value for our infrastructure, that there is accountability from this government or the next government, whoever it might be.

Further to that, within this legislation we see the idea that the full life cycle cost is considered. I have to say that I'm worried, Mr. Speaker. We've heard several ministers on that side of the House . . .

8:10

The Speaker: Hon. members, if you'd like to have private conversations, there are lots of places to do that. At the very least keep them to a level where I can't at least hear them, and show some courtesy to the member speaking.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The idea of ensuring that we recognize the full life cycle cost of a project seems to elude this government. You know, it might be written in this legislation, Bill 73, but the fact is that we've seen several ministers on that side of the House continue to support the idea of P3s and even consider and are in the process of moving P3s forward in our education system, in potentially our seniors ministry or within housing. These continue to be concerns because the fact is that we've seen Auditors General across Canada that have come back after these projects are finished and determined that governments would have actually saved millions and millions of dollars if they had just made those investments themselves.

Mr. Speaker, you may or may not have heard stories of the concerns that come from school boards and from schools after the fact of these P3 schools being built because they so often have issues getting a hold of those companies or corporations, that built in partnership with those school boards, to actually handle things like broken boilers or whatever it might be. Again, I'm not sure that the direction and the decisions of this government are actually supported by their own legislation that they're trying to move forward on.

We've heard members on this side of the House, specifically members that were previously ministers, talk about the fact that pieces that are within Bill 73, most of them, in terms of the process of accountability for how we plan infrastructure into the future are already things that are considered and that are happening and that, if anything, Bill 73 is actually going backwards in terms of the criteria that is considered when those projects are being communicated, when they're being planned, and when they move forward.

I would be very interested to hear what the public has to say about this legislation. [interjection] That's okay at this time. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd be interested to hear what the public has to say about this. I think that from what we've heard, they are concerned that there isn't a piece around collaboration, about ensuring that those partnerships are being considered, especially when it comes to this idea of a 20-year capital plan, that we're talking about billions and billions of dollars and projects that are going to set up the province and our municipalities for the future, yet we aren't even willing to consider through Bill 73, the Infrastructure Accountability Act, the opportunities for partnership between all levels of government.

Mr. Speaker, I really think it goes back to the fact that this government and this Premier seem to believe that they know best. They seem to believe that decisions that are made by different levels of government are getting in their way even on issues that are of great importance to the people of our province, whether we're talking about child care, whether we're talking about ensuring

pandemic dollars are flowing to Albertans, whether small businesses or workers themselves. These are decisions that have been delayed on and on by this government because they're unwilling to give any credit to anyone that isn't themselves when it comes to ensuring that people are safe and that projects are getting completed and on and on.

So there's a lot of concern here, the fact that, again, this government is willing to go back on the decisions around city charters, the fact that this government continues down a path of P3s that in many cases don't get accounted for in that budget cycle and put off that debt accounting onto future years and future governments.

Even today, Mr. Speaker, we saw in this House the UCP using procedural trickery to ensure that legislation that we're putting forward to hold this government accountable isn't even considered, putting it to the bottom of the Order Paper. This continues to go back to the fact that this government would do anything in its power to ensure that they are not held accountable, so I'm not convinced that even with Bill 73, the Infrastructure Accountability Act, going through the process if it were to be passed, they would even be willing to follow through with the commitments that they've made within that legislation. It's hard to believe.

Again, when we look at the considerations around the failed gamble on the Keystone XL, the failed gamble on the \$4.7 billion corporate handout, which we've heard time and time again that the largest, most well-off corporations are using for stock buybacks, to move their facilities and their companies that they have here into other jurisdictions – the list is long, Mr. Speaker, of mistakes that this government has made, and unfortunately it's Albertans, at the end of the day, that lose. But I hope that we can continue to have discussions around Bill 73, that it will be referred to committee, that we'll have an opportunity to bring in stakeholders, both private citizens, nonprofits, municipal organizations, municipal governments, and Indigenous groups. I mean, the list of people that are going to be affected by such a piece of legislation is long, and it's deeply important that we get that right.

With that, I look forward to hearing some more comments from my colleagues. At this time I will be supporting the referral to committee. I hope that all members of the Assembly will be, and with that, I think, since I don't see any interjections at this point, I'm going to take my seat.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, on amendment REF1 are there others? The hon. Member for Red Deer-South.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I'll stand and speak against the amendment – no surprise there – but I'm actually really excited about this act. One of the reasons I ran to serve as an MLA is that I really have a strong desire to see more accountability in government and a better culture, a culture towards excellence. I would like to give for the members a real-life example of where I think this act can be of great value. I'd like to talk about AHS and how they carry on with their infrastructure projects.

In the constituency in which I serve, the Red Deer regional hospital is in my constituency, and this hospital serves a catchment population of more than 300,000 Albertans. In addition to Red Deer, the hospital serves the residents of surrounding communities in central Alberta for medical emergencies. While there are some small hospitals in central Alberta, Albertans in central Alberta depend on the hospital to meet their emergency health needs.

What happened in terms of infrastructure and the hospital is that over a period of a number of years, including the Redford PC government, under the NDP government, unfortunately, there have been growing overcrowding issues at the hospital, more profound

than any other area in the province. But more important than that, Mr. Speaker, is that there have been resulting poor health outcomes for Albertans living in central Alberta due to a lack of infrastructure investment. This issue has become so profound that concerned members in our community started a Demand Care website. In fact, there is now a society that is advocating for equitable infrastructure investment in health care in central Alberta.

8:20

But I want to talk about what a lack of accountability resulted in. When the NDP came into power in 2016, the NDP dropped the hospital from the provincial infrastructure priority list. The citizens, the families and individuals in Red Deer, were really concerned. There was public outrage. I think the NDP government heard about that. The NDP later on did put the hospital back on the list, but, Mr. Speaker, they didn't do anything. Yes, they removed it in 2016 from the list, then the public had to get upset, and with that public outcry the NDP put it back on the list, but they didn't do anything. They did nothing.

Mr. Bilous: That's wrong.

Mr. Stephan: Well, it's actually true.

In 2017 in response to systematic government neglect a group of citizens formed the Society for Hospital Expansion in Central Alberta. This occurred in 2017 under the NDP in absence of an infrastructure accountability act. This society, Mr. Speaker, actually has a website called Demand Care, www.demandcare.ca, and I invite all members in the Legislature to visit the Demand Care website because what it illustrates is what happens when there is a lack of accountability in infrastructure, when governments act for political purposes and don't use objective criteria based on merit and need when evaluating infrastructure needs.

This society states that data obtained from AHS indicates that during a 10-year period Calgary received \$2.5 billion, Edmonton \$1.4 billion, and central Alberta \$107 million for health care infrastructure, or \$228 per person for central Alberta, significantly the lowest of any area of the province, where there is an average of \$2,300 per person, 10-fold of what was in central Alberta. Now, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that we will never be perfect in terms of per capita comparisons. I understand that. I understand, too, that, of course, in some larger centres – for example, in Calgary and Edmonton – just based on a population base they will have some specialized services available that from an economies-of-scale perspective are just not feasible to have everywhere.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, unprincipled governments, when they use vote bribing, that does not prioritize fairness. It lacks accountability, and the numbers speak for themselves. The NDP failed on that. Speaking with members of the medical community involved in this society, part of the issue is an AHS structure which denies local representation in capital decision-making. Decision-making for the central region resides with AHS officials in Edmonton and Calgary, with a feeling in central Alberta that some decisions happen less on principle, with a focus on public health outcomes, and more on calculated vote buying, with a focus on political outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, with materially higher risk of adverse outcomes in the event of, for example, heart attacks, central Albertans for many years were asking for a cardiac cath lab at the hospital which the NDP ... [interjection] Oh, sorry. Yes. I'm happy for an intervention.

Mr. Williams: Thank you to the Member for Red Deer-South. I think he was getting to the point maybe that I was going to ask about. I know he's a passionate advocate for his community, especially when it comes to the cath lab. Could the member talk a

bit about what it means not just in dollars and cents, which is important to understand at a policy level, but in terms of individual lack of access and lives that are affected because of a lack of accountability in terms of infrastructure and how it affects your constituents and those in central Alberta, where it serves a catchment area of, I believe, a couple hundred thousand, because you do not have those services? Are there individual instances that you know of people that have been affected negatively because of the way that previous governments have neglected your community?

Mr. Stephan: Thank you for that question, Member. I actually do. One of our elected city council officials in this recent election actually had a close relative die because there was a lack of cath lab services. That is a really important observation. The most important part when we kind of talk about infrastructure is: how do we improve health outcomes for central Albertans? Governments need, in terms of a health system, to put individuals at the heart of the health care system. When we have infrastructure decisions that are not based on merit and need, we subordinate the personal, important needs of individuals and we do a disservice to the public interest.

Mr. Speaker, I know the heart of the Infrastructure minister. He is a principled and good individual. He also has competence and experience in the real world in project management. I'm grateful that we have the Infrastructure minister that we have.

Something that the Infrastructure Accountability Act needs to focus and develop as well is that it's not only important to choose the right projects based on merit and need, but when we execute those projects in an inefficient, irresponsible way, what happens is that we crowd out the ability to pursue and provide the next most important infrastructure project that might otherwise be denied funding because there is no money.

I want to give an example, again using AHS. Unfortunately, we know about the Grande Prairie hospital. Of course, there was a need there based on merit. We're not debating that, but when the Grande Prairie hospital was announced and started in 2011, it was supposed to be completed in 2014. Now, we know that the hospital was actually completed 10 years later, in 2021, but it was supposed to be completed in three years. Not only that, Mr. Speaker, but the hospital was, unfortunately, over budget about \$100 million dollars, as I understand it, reported in the press, on an \$850 million budget.

Mr. Speaker, we really need to be better stewards of the taxpayer dollars. I came from the private sector. Government culture needs to spend the money as if it was their own and be very careful. Again, we need more accountability in government. I support this act. I deny this amendment. We should seek more accountability, especially in infrastructure serving the public interest.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

8:30

The Speaker: The hon. the Government House Leader.

Bill 79 Trails Act

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to rise today to move second reading of the Alberta Trails Act, Bill 79.

It's a pleasure to be here to raise it today. I have a couple of things I want to talk about in regard to the Trails Act, some of it in anticipation of where the Official Opposition will go on this important piece of legislation, but quickly I just want to take it back to about three years ago, to how we ended up with a promise in our

platform of bringing a piece of legislation like the Trails Act to this Chamber. Mr. Speaker, you'll know, because you were there at that time, that about six months before the last election we saw the then NDP government take extraordinary actions inside the eastern slopes. They chose to make decisions about the area that I call home in particular, which is Clearwater county and the area west of Rocky Mountain House and west of Sundre and west of Ponoka county.

Mr. Speaker, they decided they were going to make an announcement about that beautiful area of the world. I know that you spent some of your youth growing up in Nordegg, and you know it well. The NDP at that time – I've always found this kind of shocking – were going to announce a new plan for an area many times the size of Belgium, a very large area that many people call home: three First Nations communities call it home, the community of Rocky Mountain House, the community of Drayton Valley, the community of Sundre, the community of Rimbey, the community of Eckville, the community of Alder Flats, Caroline, and many more that are adjacent to that area. They were going to come and make an announcement about that area.

Do you think, Mr. Speaker, that they came to Rocky Mountain House to make that announcement or anywhere near those eastern slopes? No. Shockingly enough, they went to downtown Edmonton and took a backdrop, a nice picture of my backyard, and blew it all up, put it up inside the YMCA – I believe it was right here in downtown Edmonton – and made an announcement about what they were going to do inside our community. Of course, you know, every community, every municipality voted unanimously to say that they were against this plan. The three First Nations communities that call that area home – the Bighorn, the O'Chiese, and the Sunchild – said that they had not been consulted on the plan and fought very, very hard in the dying months of the NDP government to be able to prevent that.

Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to say that moments after I was sworn in as the Minister of Environment and Parks I shut down the NDP's Bighorn plan and fundamentally rejected it because that's what my community wanted. We were proud to do that, but we did recognize at the time that there had to be something done to be able to create a system that could have sustainable trails and recreation management on that important landscape.

There are a lot of things that take place in that area. Often the NDP want to focus on off-highway vehicles, which I will talk about briefly in a moment, but there are a lot more things that take place inside that community, as you know, Mr. Speaker, everything from cross-country skiing, equestrian activity, hiking, hunting activities, traplines that are inside the area, and on and on and on as people recreate on this important landscape. What was apparent was that the people that were keeping care of that landscape the most were volunteer organizations, were clubs, off-highway vehicle clubs, which, of course, we know the NDP hate. They don't like them. I get it. They made that very, very clear. But there are others. There's the Friends of the Eastern Slopes, which is primarily around horse-riding activities, the Bighorn standing committee that works with the First Nation communities in the area to provide everything from snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, hiking, and those types of other activities on the landscape.

What all of those organizations have in common is that they're not the government. They're not unionized, and they operate on their own relatively well without too much problems from the government. Most of the time the government actually causes problems when they interfere with them by not allowing them to do their work. Mr. Speaker, they operate on basically no taxpayer dollars while maintaining the landscape that they love.

The NDP at that time came forward and said that they could do that better than them, which, of course, was rejected by the community.

We promised at that time that we would come forward with legislation that, one, protected the trails that these organizations have been building and, two, would make sure that we could create frameworks that could allow those trails to be able to interact with other activities that were taking place on the landscape, stuff like forestry management zones, oil and gas activity that takes place on those landscapes, and those other types of things – there was nothing within that trail disposition type of a system on public lands that would allow that to take place – and then, lastly, that we would be able to put in a process such that where trails were inappropriate, we could work with those organizations to stop activities like wheels inside water in important fish habitats and those types of circumstances all across this landscape. We did that and we are doing that with the Trails Act.

Now, the NDP will get very upset about this, Mr. Speaker, and the chattering classes inside the media, that are essentially the NDP's press secretaries at times, some of them, on this issue will as well because their main goal continues to be to block everybody from entering the landscape. When they tried to do the Bighorn plan in that area, nobody would be allowed to access it outside of very controlled provincial park areas, and that was the way it was going to be. This bill is not that. This bill will make sure that we can protect infrastructure that is being invested inside of these landscapes, help these organizations to actually care about these landscapes, to be able to continue their important conservation work.

Now, Mr. Speaker, one of the things that really upset these organizations, who in many cases had volunteered for decades to be able to create these types of recreation opportunities inside the eastern slopes, was the fact that when the NDP was going to do this – and they did it in Crowsnest as well – it was going to just wipe out all of the investment that had come from private dollars to be able to create those trails. This act will make sure that no government in the future can do that. It will protect and respect the investment of organizations who are working with the department to put bridges in to be able to make sure that you can do water crossings in environmentally friendly ways and to be able to create infrastructure that people can use for generations to come.

Now, Mr. Speaker, one thing I do want to get across very much today – and I'll have more to say as we get to Committee of the Whole – is that at its core this will protect and respect organizations that want to work in the eastern slopes with us, those organizations we depend on. Now, I've spoken inside this Chamber many times about a great organization called the Friends of the Eastern Slopes. They are an organization around the Ya Ha Tinda Ranch. Back in the '80s – the federal government has the ranch, operates the ranch since the Brewster brothers sold it to them just before Confederation, I believe, or just afterwards – Albertans loved to go there for many different types of recreation activities.

It's a world-wide horseback riding destination, world famous. Everybody who is a horse person loves or knows about the Ya Ha Tinda. Some people dream their whole lives of coming from all over the world to be able to have an opportunity to go horseback riding there. Also a great spot to elk hunt, Mr. Speaker, and a pretty special location.

In the '80s it was getting damaged, so the federal government at that time made a decision to ban everybody from being able to enter the ranch. The ranch is a working ranch; it raises and trains all of the horses that are used in the national park service in the entire country, inside the Ya Ha Tinda Ranch. If you've never had the privilege of being there – I know you have, Mr. Speaker, but as some of our colleagues have not, I highly encourage them to come and have a visit. It was shut because of some inappropriate activity that was taking place there while the national park service was running it.

Inside the Mountain-Aire Lodge, a couple of years after that, a lodge that I had the privilege of running for many, many years and calling home, was a meeting that took place in the early '90s, and a group formed calling themselves the Friends of the Eastern Slopes. They came together, and they convinced the national park service to turn over that area to them as volunteers, that they would do their own fundraising and they would volunteer together to be able to make sure that they could access this beautiful spot.

They did that, and I'm proud to say, Mr. Speaker, that we are now 30-some years later, and that organization is still running one of the most beautiful places in the world. If you ever drive up there, you'll see it and you'll see how spectacular it is, frankly, compared to things that are run by both the provincial government and the federal government, that are right adjacent to it. You'll see that the model is better. That is the model that the NDP wants to reject and is one of the reasons why they fight against important legislation like this.

The other organization that they don't want us to partner with – but don't worry; we're going to get this bill passed, I suspect, Mr. Speaker – is the Alberta TrailNet Society, which is working to connect the Trans Canada Trail throughout Alberta and is currently developing a portion of the trail that passes on the north side of Lesser Slave Lake.

As well, Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to say to you that, beyond off-highway vehicles, this bill is supported by the Alberta Hiking Association, which represents over 2 million hikers across Alberta and helps local hiking groups to promote their activities. Of course, the Crowsnest Pass Quad Squad has dedicated hundreds of hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars to building water crossings, repairing erosion, and ensuring that their off-highway vehicle activities can continue on the landscape. Then our partners the Alberta Snowmobile Association, which maintains thousands of kilometres of snowmobile trails in every corner of the province. Their executive director, Chris, told me last week that they have been advocating for legislation like this bill since 1999. Then Nordiq Alberta, which supports local cross-country ski clubs in maintaining their trails and has been doing so for generations.

8:40

These are just a few examples of the groups that we will empower with this legislation and, most importantly, Mr. Speaker, that we will make sure are protected, that their work is protected, for generations to come.

The other thing I want to briefly talk about while I am introducing this bill, Mr. Speaker, is around the concept that I have seen the Official Opposition, again, some of their chattering classes in the media already speaking about, that this somehow will create chaos on the landscape. The reality is that nothing could be further from the truth.

This bill is based on a joint project that was done between the county of Clearwater and the Alberta government, called the Clearwater trail initiative, in which there was a grant given to Clearwater county at the time. Clearwater county is an interesting place, Mr. Speaker. It has on some long weekends over 100,000 people camped outside of Rocky Mountain House, which is a community of just about 7,500 people, so there are a lot of people that come out to this area.

Clearwater county went out and they put a sasquatch sign, a big sasquatch. Anybody who has been to Rocky Mountain House has seen it. Those are not my campaign posters. That's actually part of the trail initiative there.

An Hon. Member: There's a likeness.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Certainly, there's a likeness. It might be one of my brothers.

They would put those signs up in areas where it was good to go ATVing, it was good to go horseback riding, good places to camp. They put that up and recommended them. They didn't focus on shutting things down; they focused on showing people where it was okay to go and working with organizations to be able to make sure they could deal with things like water crossings or other things in those areas. What they found was that about 99 per cent, Mr. Speaker, of people that came and saw that sasquatch sign understood where to go, used the infrastructure appropriately, and went on with their time. That's what happens when you invest inside a trail system to make sure that people can use it.

Mr. Speaker, I've got a lot more that I'm going to talk about in detail when we get to Committee of the Whole, but at the end of the day why I am so passionate about this is that beyond the modern uses that we have for trails, our trail system in our country and in our province has a tremendous amount of historical value not only in how it contributes to our everyday life, recreation, our physical health as Albertans now, but of course, coming from an area like I come from and, again, the place that you grew up, in Nordegg, it has a history for several centuries since David Thompson himself came and founded the town of Rocky Mountain House and before that, of course, our First Nation communities that have called that area home since the beginning of time.

Some of those historical trails we still use today. I was telling my staff when we were writing up this piece of legislation about one of my favourite trails west of Rocky Mountain House that is marked still to this day, Mr. Speaker. The turn that you will take in the backcountry with your horse is marked by a rock that was engraved by David Thompson over two centuries ago to be able to mark his path as he would go over the eastern slopes and into B.C.

Until this act is passed, those trails aren't protected. At any time something could happen. Industrial activity, logging, other things are taking place on the landscape. Those are important activities for our economic health and are very, very valued by our community, but without an important piece of legislation like this to be able to identify that important historical place and the value of that important trail, it could eventually just be plowed over. Now with this legislation there'll be a way for those organizations who are protecting these trails to be able to interact with that trail appropriately and to be able to make sure that it is protected for generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, if passed, the Trails Act and the associated amendments will establish the cornerstones for a sustainable trail management system on public land. It will enable trails to be designated for specific uses such as hiking, riding, and off-highway vehicles. It will enable improved trail planning, which will consider other land-use values. It will strengthen and protect our trails so that Albertans can enjoy them for years to come. It will enable better enforcement tools to prevent environmental damage and promote environmental stewardship of public land, and it will promote a bigger role for partners in managing trails and their maintenance.

Mr. Speaker, most important, it is a fulfillment of a platform commitment and a commitment to Albertans who value their trails and recreation on the important landscapes inside our province and will make sure that those organizations' work is valued and will prevent the NDP from doing the horrendous thing that they tried to do three years ago to a community in west-central Alberta, the horrendous thing that they did to communities inside the Crownsnest Pass, which was to try to block them from their own backyards and try to stop them from being able to recreate in their backyards the way that they have for generations. This act will make sure that we protect that for the future and make sure that we can continue to

recreate on the landscape the way we have for generations while protecting our environment.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before the Assembly: the Trails Act. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View has risen.

Ms Ganley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am incredibly pleased to rise to speak to this bill and especially to speak to this bill after that particular performance by the minister. I have seen some sales jobs and some rhetoric in my time. I don't think I have ever seen anything that rises to quite that level.

Mr. Speaker, let us begin with what this bill does not do. It does not in fact fulfill an election promise. In fact, it explicitly fails to fulfill such an election promise, which was made by the UCP, to bring in a user fee for OHVs. This act does not do that. In addition, the minister indicated that he was going to bring in such a user fee.

Why would that be important? Well, it's important because this government already is charging Albertans to, quote, unquote, use their own backyard. Hikers, campers, day users: anyone entering the Kananaskis area is now subject to a fee, and when that fee was introduced, it was noted by several members of the public and organizations and basically everyone that the fee applied to hikers and campers in Kananaskis. It did not apply to McLean Creek, which is primarily OHV use, despite the fact that, on average, OHV use tends to cause more damage to the environment. The minister had suggested that the reason that we needed this fee in Kananaskis to be charged was because individuals should pay for the upkeep of the trail, and apparently that goes for hikers and campers but not for OHV users. This act does not address that problem.

In addition, it doesn't address the actual problem that we have, which is to say that we need to adjudicate between uses. It is not possible to continue using these areas at the rate that they are presently used while also ensuring that we have access to the same historical environment, that we have fish to fish and that we have wildlife in its habitat. This is a problem which arises not because the, quote, unquote, as the minister put it, chattering class invented it, not because scientists invented it, not because the NDP invented it but because it simply exists. You cannot just do whatever you want with an environment and expect it to stay exactly the same.

Human actions have consequences, and in this case they can potentially have detrimental consequences. It is not on those individual people to know that. It is not on those individual users to figure out how many other users happen to be in that area. It is on the government to regulate, to make a determination in terms of who gets to use what area for what purposes, and this is important.

I will quote here from a CBC article, which I'm happy to table later. The article is entitled Scientists Say New Alberta Trails Act Threatens Already-Stressed Environment, and the sort of central point of this is:

But at least four peer-reviewed, government-funded studies have concluded that road and trail density are already harming populations of animals such as caribou, grizzly bears and bull trout. That's especially true in the province's southwestern foothills and mountains, where off-highway vehicle use has long been popular.

Now, unlike what the minister claims, I have no dislike for OHV users. I know many. I am happy for them to use their vehicles. In fact, many responsible OHV users – one is cited in the very article to which I am currently referring – would like for there to be some rules set up so that everyone uses responsibly, and I think that that's fair.

8:50

Continuing to quote:

The Livingstone-Porcupine Hills plan for the area, a legal document, stipulates no more than 0.4 kilometres of trail for every square kilometre in the most sensitive zones and [no more than] 0.6 kilometres everywhere else. Government estimates already put the density in the area at between 0.9 to 5.9 kilometres for every square kilometre.

That is the primary concern. That is the situation which this does not address. It doesn't address the environmental concerns. It doesn't address the inequity in terms of who is charged a fee for using the land versus who isn't charged a fee for using the land.

It also has some concerning provisions. Now, arguably, this bill doesn't actually add anything new. It doesn't add really anything over and above what was sort of available already in terms of the Public Lands Act and the public lands administration regulation. The one interesting thing that it does do: it claims to give paramountcy to the Public Lands Act and allow that to sort of prevail to the extent of the inconsistency.

But it has a really interesting regulation-making power. Now, I know that not that many people are into regulation-making powers, but I read a lot of legislation when we were in government. One of the jobs of the Minister of Justice in any government is to chair what is called the Legislative Review Committee, which means reading all the government's legislation. Many people aren't that into that. In fact, I would say that the vast majority of my colleagues were not that into that. I happen to really, really enjoy that particular work.

One of the things that I really tended to look at was regulation-making power, and I don't think I've ever actually seen a regulation-making power like this. It's a deficiency regulation, which means essentially where something isn't addressed in legislation, but it's very oddly worded. Section 10(1):

The Lieutenant Governor in Council may make regulations . . .

And then there's an (a), but then (b) says:

remedying any confusion in the application of or any difficulty or impossibility in applying any provisions of this Act,

which is really interesting. Sort of looping back to (a), it also allows the Lieutenant Governor in Council – and that's cabinet, just on the off chance that anyone is listening to this – to modify

the provisions of the Public Lands Administration Regulation . . . to make those provisions applicable in respect of a designated trail or designated trail area.

These are interesting; (b) in particular was something I hadn't really seen before, so I thought I would go looking to see if anyone else had had this question. Luckily for me, it turns out that someone has. I am now moving to an article on what's called ABLawg, and it's at ablawg.ca. The article is entitled *Alberta Heads the Wrong Direction with Bill 79 – the Proposed Trails Act*. It is by professors Shawn Fluker and David Mayhood. It talks about exactly this provision, so it turns out that someone else has had this question. It references it, and then it sort of references the fact that these are the sorts of deficiencies that the Legislature itself should be remedying or should alternately have been addressed, you know, before the bill was passed into law.

They go on to say:

Our curiosity with section 10 led us to undertake a quick survey of legislation across Canada to see how often regulation-making power is granted to remedy confusion or an impossibility. A search of the term 'impossibility' within 10 words of 'regulations' produced only 61 hits in . . . the national CanLII database. Interestingly, most of the legislation containing this sort of provision has been enacted by only two provinces: Alberta and Manitoba. Perhaps most noteworthy is the scope of this type of regulation-making power is . . . always limited to address one of two instances . . . a difficulty or an impossibility that arises in

relation to a transition from repealed legislation to new legislation . . . a difficulty or impossibility that arises from the dissolution of a statutory entity.

In both of these instances what is being said here is that nowhere in Canada does a law like this exist that isn't trying to apply to, essentially, the Legislature repealing something. Either they're removing the existence of a statutory entity, or they've sort of repealed and replaced a piece of legislation. Those sorts of things can have unintended consequences, so you would imagine that a regulation-making power like this would be useful in those instances.

The question is: what's it doing here? It isn't dealing with a situation where you're sort of repealing something and bringing something new or you're dissolving a previously existing agency. It's dealing with a law that's in place and will continue to be in place versus the law that we're passing right now. To me, what this says is that something very questionable is occurring. I would urge the public – I mean, they are already – to kind of question what it is that's attempting to happen here because, again, in terms of the goals the minister has stated for what this legislation is going to do, it doesn't achieve them. Aside from ensuring that, you know, people continue to be able to recreate, it doesn't modernize anything. It certainly doesn't improve environmental impact. In fact, it does quite the opposite.

The main concern that we have with this – and I know the government has tried to create this us-and-them narrative where there are regular people and then there are the, quote, unquote, chattering classes, which is a thing this government does frequently. They've been doing it since they were in opposition. It's a problematic tactic for a number of reasons.

But I think the real concern here is that Albertans are concerned, and they have a right to be concerned. Albertans were concerned when this government proposed unilaterally, without consultation of them, to begin coal mining in the eastern slopes. They stood up against that. Albertans were concerned when this government came in and unilaterally imposed fees on them to use Kananaskis, an area they had historically always had access to. They were particularly concerned that users of Kananaskis were expected to pay a fee whereas users of McLean Creek were not expected pay the same fee despite arguably more impact on the landscape and needing more funds in order to ensure that those trails were properly tended. I think this bill is a major concern. At best it achieves absolutely nothing, and in achieving nothing, it doesn't fulfill a promise made by the minister, made by this government in their campaign promise to Albertans. In addition to that, it potentially walks things backwards.

Now, another concern is that, you know, the whole point of this, the whole point of management of trails, is supposed to be that we are worried about cumulative impacts on the land. What that requires is that we do land-use planning. We consider what we want to protect, how we want the landscape to be in the future, what we want to leave to our children, and we plan to use the land in such a way that that continues to be the case. That's what the point of land-use planning is. It allows some users to use some areas, some users to use other areas. It sort of regulates between different individuals because, again, as the population of Alberta increases and the land continues to not have the capacity to sort of bear increased use, we need to adjudicate essentially between whose turn. I mean, essentially, what we're talking about here is making a lineup for a slide – right? – deciding whose turn it is when. But that land-use planning hasn't been done by this government, and this does nothing to remedy that fact. In fact, it doesn't really give the minister additional powers to kind of strengthen environmental protection. It might give him additional powers to override environmental protection, potentially.

9:00

This is a big concern, and it's particularly a big concern because of who it's coming from. This is a government that demonstrated a complete lack of respect for Albertans. They went ahead with repealing a coal policy that was brought in by that radical Peter Lougheed because they felt that it was, I guess, too left leaning, that it provided too much protection to our environment. I know the government wants to say that it's the chattering classes, as they put it, that objected to this, but it wasn't. It was everyone. It was hikers, it was scientists, it was ranchers, it was farmers, and it was people who lived in towns that were in the watershed area. Pretty much everyone resoundingly objected to that plan. That is one of the reasons why, when they come forward with a bill that does, at best, nothing and, at worst, essentially works to roll back and undercut what limited environmental protections exist now, that's pretty problematic.

This government has demonstrated a complete disrespect for our natural environment and for anyone that cares about it. I think that we should all be deeply concerned about this bill, and I don't think that that is unreasonable. The minister keeps speaking extensively about how he'll speak more at Committee of the Whole or even in his closing comments here in second reading. I would invite the minister to explain two or three instances in which he plans to use those particular deficiency regulations and explain why he needs this power if he did his homework and made sure that there weren't these conflicts.

I would like an explanation for why it is that they claim this fulfills an election promise when, in fact, that promise was clear, in black and white, to apply fees equitably, to bring in a fee on OHV use, and they haven't done that in here. That's fine. You know, if the government doesn't want to charge fees on things, I think that's their choice. But then explain how they plan to pay for the upkeep of those trails, because their argument with respect to Kananaskis was that there's no possible way – I mean, it's been done throughout history – for us to do it without charging these fees. I would love to hear what the explanation for that inconsistency is.

Again, the concerns around this bill, the major concerns, are that we are, for the most part, already above the number of trails that we ought to have. We are already at the point where all of our evidence tells us we are doing environmental damage, that the environment that we hand to our children will not be the same one that we ourselves have enjoyed. That won't just affect our enjoyment of the land. It will affect our agriculture. It will affect multiple uses. I think that is something about which we should be incredibly concerned, because some of this damage, once done, cannot easily be remedied.

I think, Mr. Speaker, this act is incredibly concerning. It's not at all clear to me that it achieves any of the minister's stated goals, and I think this takes us backwards. I find this act problematic. I will be objecting to it, I will not be voting in favour of it, and I hope that this government will provide some sort of explanation for what way they could possibly think it attains the stated goals.

The Speaker: Hon. members, on the Trails Act I see the hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis has risen.

Ms Rosin: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the MLA for beautiful Banff-Kananaskis I am super excited to rise today and speak in support of this bill. Alberta is the natural place to host a world-class, world-famous recreational tourism industry. We have the natural beauty. We have the mountains. We have the backcountry. We have phenomenal landscapes. We're the natural place to host this recreational tourism industry, but we need to have recreational

assets to be able to do that, and this act actually propels that forward and enables us to do that.

I actually wasn't going to speak today, but I did feel the need to stand up after the previous member's speech and refute a couple of things that were said. I'll start by saying, Mr. Speaker, that when our hon. Minister of Environment and Parks gave his speech tonight, he talked a lot about how our NDP opposition wants nothing more than to shut Albertans out of the backcountry. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View refuted that and suggested, I believe, that his speech was, quote, unquote, a performance while subsequently going on to say a couple of things, I would note, that highlight exactly the validity of what the minister had said.

The hon. member specifically highlighted a news article in which it was quoted that the Trails Act threatens the already overused trail system in Alberta. Then it was also stated that, quote, unquote, we already have above the number of trails we ought to have. Well, Mr. Speaker, nothing is more clear about a claim to shut Albertans out of the backcountry than an hon. member, quote, unquote, saying that we already have far above the number of trails we ought to have and that the Trails Act threatens an already used space and that we just ought to keep Albertans out of them.

Mr. Speaker, make no mistake. The NDP's primary goal is to keep Albertans out of the wilderness, prohibit them from recreating in the world-class, God-given, most beautiful place on Planet Earth, which I have the honour of representing. I just want to be clear.

Mr. Williams: Will you give way?

Ms Rosin: Yes, hon. member. I would love to give way.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Member for Banff-Kananaskis, for giving way to your colleague right next door. Would you be able to speak to what would happen to your constituency if the NDP had its way and sanitized Albertans out of the backcountry? What would happen, if we cleared Albertans out of the beautiful landscapes that we enjoy, the mountains that we hike and climb, the rivers we canoe down, and the trails that we walk on, to the good constituents of Banff-Kananaskis?

Ms Rosin: Thank you to my colleague. Banff-Kananaskis would go bankrupt. That is what happens. Mr. Speaker, we thrive on recreational tourism in Banff-Kananaskis. I have said it a thousand times in this House. There are a million destinations on Planet Earth that pride themselves on man-made attractions, but here in Alberta and specifically in Banff-Kananaskis we have a recreational tourism industry based on the God-given beauty all around us.

Recreational tourism contributes \$5.4 billion to Alberta's GDP already, the equivalent of 77,000 full-time equivalent jobs. To put that into perspective, that is 6.1 times the employment rate of both the forestry and the logging industries, Mr. Speaker. Recreational tourism is a significant economic driver, but we are actually bleeding billions of dollars to B.C., who does an even better job than we do. That's why we need to step up our game and promote the recreational tourism industry. We need to promote legislation that allows us to propel this industry forward, create trails, create recreational tourism assets. We already need to do more. I can see my hon. colleague mocking my hand gestures. That's okay. I'm a handsy talker.

This industry is so critically important to the area that I represent. We are the tourism driver of this province, and that is based on recreational tourism. That's why I support this act, because this act enables us to continue to build on the recreational tourism

foundation that we have. [interjection] Sorry. I did not see you. I will give way.

9:10

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think it's probably worth rising just to ask the member a couple of questions since she represents the area. I assume she's heard the same concerns as I do. Now, she takes the position that the article I quoted, which was quoting from scientific, peer-reviewed articles – it stated in the article that we had a higher density of trails than was permitted under the land-use planning. I'm just wondering if she's heard from constituents in her riding who have actually said that that isn't true. She stood in this place and she said that the statements I made were inaccurate and incorrect. She's misrepresented the things that I said, which were that we need to reduce the number of trails, not that we need to stop having trails. I would love to know if she's never heard those concerns from anyone in her constituency.

Ms Rosin: Thank you, hon. member. I can actually factually say that, no, I've literally never heard one of my constituents ask me to make fewer trails and to prohibit access to the backcountry. Canmore and Banff are the most-sought-after destinations to live in, arguably, in the entire world, and the reason people move there to live is so that they can have access to recreate there. People don't move there to sit on their balconies and drink wine and stare at the mountains. Everyone in my constituency is more fit than I could ever aspire to be because they recreate every day. They hike, they climb, they mountain bike, they downhill ski, and they cross-country ski. Mr. Speaker, I can actually say that I have literally never once heard a constituent ask for less access to their own backyard. I would also like to say that, no, I did not misrepresent the hon. member. I just directly quoted her.

But one other thing the hon. member said in her speech, and I will again directly quote. I will not misrepresent. It was said that this act does nothing, that it actually does the complete opposite. Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't think you can do the opposite of nothing, so in order to do the opposite of something, you have to do something in the first place.

What this act does, Mr. Speaker – I would love to tell you because I'm so proud of it – is two key things. In my area one of the largest problems is that we have this expansive trail network that's been put together with, I believe, over 160,000 volunteer hours. This trail network is put together entirely by volunteers, by not-for-profits, and these groups, every time they want to build a new trail or maintain an existing trail or even so much as move a twig that's in the way off a trail, basically have to reapply for permission to the Department of Environment and Parks, go through the entire regulatory process to get permission to do that thing to that trail. What this bill will do is that it will allow those groups, who have been stewards of this land for decades, who have spent over a hundred thousand volunteer hours and donations to build these trail networks, to be designated as trail managers.

It treats them with the dignity and the respect that they've deserved for years and tells them: "You know what? Every time you want to maintain a trail that you've actually built yourself on volunteer hours and donations, we'll let you. We trust you because you've already done a good job." Rather than apply on a per-trail basis, now these groups can apply to be trail managers, and they can be designated an entire region, saying: "This is yours. You've built it. You've maintained it for decades. You funded it through private donations. It's yours, and you can take care of it." We trust these people to do a great job, a better job, I would note, than the government could do and has been able to do in the past.

One other great thing that this act does is that it designates trails as Crown assets for the first time. Mr. Speaker, anyone who represents a recreational area – and this is no slight to the logging industry. I do want to note that forestry and logging play a very important role in Banff-Kananaskis as well. But there has always been a conflict, and it's the age-old tale of the conflict between the recreational tourism industry and the forestry industry. That's because the forestry industry has always had precedence over the recreational tourism industry. Recreational tourism has never been treated with the dignity that it deserves as a true economic driver in this province.

What happens is that when a new forest management plan is approved, oftentimes the trails that have been built with hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours are disregarded. There is no requirement of forestry companies to maintain them, work around them, rebuild them, or relocate them if they want to log there. Oftentimes the logging companies will do this out of respect for the trail managers, but they've previously had no formal obligation to. But what this bill will do is that it will designate those trails as Crown assets, which means that they belong to the government. They are finally designated as a true entity. They're not just a trail that's been dug through the weeds, through the twigs, that can be steamrolled and disregarded. For the first time these trails will be something that cannot be disregarded. They will be something that if a forestry company – and I will give way in one moment – wants to come into that area, they will have a duty and an obligation to either maintain that trail, protect that trail, work around that trail, or relocate that trail if they need to forest that area. It will provide balance and certainty to our recreational and tourism industry. [interjection] I will give way again.

Mr. Williams: Thank you to the Member for Banff-Kananaskis for giving way. Now, the member preceding you made a few points about the environmental damage that the bill will do, but you seem to think otherwise. Are there any trail groups in the province, these notorious industrialists and, you know, famously nefarious capitalists and climate skeptics, that support this legislation?

Ms Rosin: Well, thank you. There sure are. In fact, trails groups from almost every sector of recreational trail use have endorsed this bill. We've got the Alberta Snowmobile Association, the Alberta Hiking Association, the Alberta Off Highway Vehicle Association, the Alberta TrailNet Society. Mr. Speaker, no matter what kind of recreation you do and what kind of trail you might do it on, they have endorsed this bill. That's because this bill has been done through thorough consultation, and it honours exactly what these people have wanted for years, which is to be stewards of these areas and to protect the areas that they recreate on and treat them as important pieces of Alberta's economic future.

Mr. Speaker, I'm going to conclude my remarks. I will note that the hon. member highlighted the nefarious trail users, and it's funny because people oftentimes look to British Columbia as the pinnacle of doing environmental protection right. With a very strong environmentalist base in British Columbia, they have placed environmental protection as a very high priority, and that's great. But what's interesting to note is that British Columbia is arguably the number one destination in Canada for supporting and expanding access to recreational trails. Not only do they have trails, they have crazy things like lift-assisted bike lifts, like you would see on a ski hill, on their Crown lands. The place that supports environmental conservation to the highest extent in Canada also has found a way to support recreational tourism to the highest extent, and that is a balance that is phenomenal and a balance that we can and need to achieve in Alberta.

In closing, I just want to highlight a couple of other things that our government has done for the environmental record because it's actually an environmental record that I am very proud of, especially as it pertains to my local constituency, and it is a record that I feel the opposition members tend to call into question a lot of times and suggest that initiatives like the Kananaskis conservation pass are really just a tax grab that have no positive impact on Albertans.

Just a couple of things in closing, Mr. Speaker, to highlight our environmental record not just across Alberta but right where I live, specifically on Crown land and provincial parks. We are expanding the provincial park land mass of Bow Valley provincial park. Let's just say that one more time. We're not selling it. We're not shrinking it. We are expanding the size of Bow Valley provincial park on top of already expanding a provincial wildland park in northern Alberta, I believe, to be the largest provincial park in the province. Those are two provincial parks that we have not just shrunk, that we have made larger, to be the largest parks in the province.

We have hired 20 conservation officers for this province, 20 in one swoop. That's more than the opposition hired in a full four years.

We consolidated, I believe, 15 various phone numbers that people could call to report public lands issues. We've consolidated 15 of them into one, 310.LAND. You can call it if you've got an environmental conservation issue or problem, a wildlife encounter. You can call this one phone number and receive easy access to safe and accessible resources.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, we are actually building the – well, everyone knows this. We've funded the very first wildlife overpass outside of a national park in Alberta's history. Twenty-five million dollars: we funded it in budget number one. We didn't even delay three years. We funded it in our very first budget to show Albertans that environmental conservation and human-wildlife mitigation is a top priority for this government.

Those are just some initiatives in my riding. There are lots more. I mentioned the provincial park up north. We're investing in extended producer liability, all kinds of wonderful environmental conservation initiatives.

I am proud to support the Trails Act, I am proud to support recreational tourism, I am proud to support the industry and expand the industry, and I am very proud to support this government's environmental record.

9:20

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, and she will be followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you. I'm interested to speak to this piece of legislation. Just a couple of things that I want to start off with in response to the hon. member that just spoke. My family is in B.C., live on the island, and spend, obviously, a lot of time hiking and camping and enjoying the beautiful landscapes of the island.

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

The fun fact about that is that when they go camping – we had this conversation over the summer because I'm an avid camper, too. I'll tell you that this year was a very expensive year to be going camping in Alberta. Being able to get a campsite, paying the fees, all of the things associated were substantial in comparison to British Columbia. For the same campsite that I would pay \$42 a night in Alberta, plus firewood, plus all of the other things that are attached to that, my parents pay \$25.

Part of the reason why British Columbia does so well with their tourism industry and why they do so well with being able to

encourage people just to be outdoors – and people enjoy going to B.C. – is because the fees that are now required to be paid in Alberta are nothing in comparison to British Columbia. There is a substantial difference in getting out and being active in British Columbia than there is in Alberta. We know that because we've now seen a fee in Kananaskis, we've seen provincial park fees increased, we've seen the cost of firewood fees increased, and we've seen basically any opportunity to increase a fee on Albertans to access their own backyard with this government. There is a big difference with the cost of access in Alberta than there is in British Columbia.

You know, I can go hiking in Campbell River, where my parents are, and there's no fee. There are beautiful parks there. Elk Falls: they just built a suspension bridge over the falls, and it's free, free parking, free all of the things. There's just a big difference, a substantial difference between accessing the back areas in British Columbia and Alberta.

Now, I have family that also lives up in the Hinton area. The interesting thing about that is that they've seen the damage caused by OHVs and the fact that my cousin even said: like, you know, I wouldn't have a problem paying a fee if I knew that the fee that I was paying was actually going to restore the trails and was actually going to clean up the area because as someone who lives around Hinton, who goes and uses Crown land, I protect that area when I go out there, but I can go to the exact same area a weekend later, and someone has gone out there and dumped a whole bunch of stuff and all of the things, and nobody is out there cleaning it up. They're paying a fee to use Crown land. We had a promise from this government to say that there were going to be people monitoring it, that it was going to get cleaned up, all of the things, yet that hasn't happened.

I appreciate that the member opposite was talking about, you know: we want trail managers; this legislation allows trail managers. Well, it's one thing to have a nonprofit group of volunteers going out on an existing trail and cleaning up the brush and the trees that have fallen down and making sure that you can still access it; it's another thing to give complete permission for the creation of new trails without having to go through environmental processes. That's a problem.

It's a problem, and we know this. I'm sure that the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry would be very sensitive to this as well as the minister of environment. We've got some pretty endangered species in this province. We know that the trout is an issue, we know that caribou is a problem, and we know that our grizzly bear population is also protected under SARA. Because of that, there are reasons why environmental protections are put in place. There are reasons why when we look at how we develop our trail system, how forestry accesses their FMAs and their land management agreements, those environmental protections are put in place.

So to say, "Well, we want to be able to have trail managers who can just decide on a section of land around our beautiful areas like Kananaskis or up north by Fort McMurray or down south" and they don't have to go through the environmental process is an absolute problem. It's a problem because we know that there are legal thresholds that have to be abided by when looking at developing these recreational areas. There absolutely are. It's not just provincially regulated; it's regulated federally, SARA being a prime example. You know, people will get frustrated with: why do we have to manage the caribou? They're quite sensitive to their environments. Trout: I mean, we know that when you're going up a strip line or you're going into the Crown land, you're probably going to cross a river at some point, and you need to make sure that if that's happening, those areas are being monitored.

You know, we hear from the government about: we have validators. Well, we also have validators that are concerned.

Alberta scientists and environmentalists say proposed legislation governing backcountry trails on public lands will thwart efforts to restore nature and add one more stressor to an already overtaxed landscape.

Environment Minister... said the Trails Act, awaiting second reading in the legislature, will not close any trails and will lay out a path for new ones.

But parts of the province are already over legal thresholds as required, and they have

“linear disturbances” – anything from a road to a cutline to a pathway. And some wonder how the bill’s intent [is] to open new access

when we already are over capacity from a legal requirement.

What’s missing in the act is trail closures in sensitive wildlife habitats. We’re making forestry companies do it. They’re having to re-evaluate their FMA agreements. They’re having to do community consultations right now to access more fibre because we know that they’re in high caribou density areas. Unfortunately, that piece continues to be missed in the conversation.

It’s not just about recreation. I support recreation. I love being outside. If I could go camping all summer, I would. I have a job, so I can’t. There’s hiking. All those things that I enjoy doing, I also do with the understanding that I have a responsibility to be a good environmental steward, and I have to be responsible and understand that there are species that are at risk in many of those areas. We have to make sure that there is a balance between the extension of our trail programs and what is going on in this act and the responsibility that we have to protect those wildlife species, and I don’t see that happening.

Sometimes trails have to be closed. We know that sometimes grizzly bears move into new areas. They den, and when they den, they come out in the spring. They take over an area. There are trails that are closed in federal parks all the time because of safety issues of interactions between humans and bears, cougars, for example, also. This isn’t a new concept to all of a sudden say that we have to have some ability to be able to keep some trails open and close others. It isn’t restricting access. That’s keeping people safe and the wildlife that they are interacting with safe because we don’t want species – I would think that the member that spoke previously would be very aware of the interactions between bears in the Kananaskis region with humans and how many animals have to be moved or, unfortunately, euthanized because they interact with humans to such an extent that they become no longer safe to be around. That’s because humans are moving into wildlife spaces. It is a fact.

Now, I don’t think that we should be looking at closing trails, as the hon. minister likes to think that we like to say. I disagree. I believe in tourism. I think it’s important that we have a tourism industry where people can come to Alberta and access Waterton and access, you know, the Crowsnest Pass and all of those beautiful areas that I spent a lot of time in when I was a child. Now, moving up into the Yellowhead area, like, I spend a lot of time there as well. I think we need to do that, but we don’t need to do it in such a fashion where we just open up the area and say: “We’re just going to put a whole bunch of trails through it. We’re going to allow all of this access. We’re going to remove all of the environmental responsibility, and we’re not going to say that people have to apply for regulatory responsibility to make sure that those areas are being protected.” I disagree. We expect it from everywhere else. Oil and gas has expectations. Forestry: they must do it. Agriculture must do it. All of these other industries that are interacting with our landscapes have responsibilities.

9:30

So it is a big question mark as to why the removal of those requirements, what this government would say is red tape, when, in fact, what it is is ensuring that we’re making sure that our environments are not only sustainable but that the animals that are in those environments are also being protected. The last thing we want to do is start saying that we’re just going to keep opening up trails, that we’re going to allow people to use OHVs wherever they want, all the things, and then our beautiful landscape, that we’re so proud of, becomes something where people come to visit and there’s garbage everywhere and there are trails everywhere and people are getting hurt because they’re getting attacked by animals and we hear all these stories and all of a sudden Alberta’s reputation is in question. “Maybe it’s not so safe to go hiking in Kananaskis because grizzly bears keep chasing people away” or “I was just hiking on this beautiful trail, and, like, there’s a big mud line right through the river because someone went through on their OHV the other day and brought up all the mud.” There is a balance. The balance doesn’t exist in this legislation.

I appreciate what the member opposite was trying to say. I think bringing in that, well, you know, forestry can create lines and then they do all these things and then they’re wrecking the landscape and stuff – they have a responsibility. They have to be able to repatriate the land. They have to make sure that those lines and those access roads that they’re using are reforested. They have a whole bunch of regulatory requirements from an environmental perspective that must be completed when they go in and are harvesting. It’s not just like they go in, they make a whole bunch of trails, they wreck the landscape, and then that’s it. In fact, that’s a really dangerous message for a government member to be saying about forestry because they are environmental stewards. They do take care of the land, and they protect the environments that they’re working in. I think as government members we should be very cautious when we start saying that forestry just goes in and rips out trees and makes trails and damages a whole bunch of land, because they won’t appreciate that very much, being one of our biggest economic drivers.

Those are my comments in regard to what the member opposite said.

Now, we can speak again to... [interjection] Hon. member, please go ahead.

Mr. Getson: Thank you to the member opposite. I always appreciate her comments because it is well thought typically and well thought out, but I believe that there was a bit of a mischaracterization of the speech from my fellow colleague from Banff-Kananaskis. I don’t believe that she said, you know – and I’m not going to use the exact quote, so I apologize for that – basically alluded to ripping and tearing and rip and tear and pull hair. That’s not what forestry does, and that’s not what she said. What she was saying was that the trail systems themselves would have a similar standing, the trail groups themselves, as to forestry and logging, so making them a Crown asset would then allow for better integration between the two, giving precedence also to the trails, taking that into consideration rather than just going over top of them. Now, coming from that area of Hinton and logging and having that as my own background, I know full well what the Member for Banff-Kananaskis was saying. So just a bit of a clarification.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, there are about two minutes and 20 seconds remaining.

Ms Sweet: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I appreciate the time check.

Thank you to the hon. member opposite for bringing up his background in forestry. I also have one. I'm very clear about my understanding of forestry and how it works, and in fact they were very amazing supporters of my community that I grew up in, and without them we wouldn't have had the community that we have or the trail lines that we have because they actually took care of the area and made sure we had access to them. A little sensitive around forestry. There's no question.

You know, hon. Speaker, I could keep going, but recognizing the time, I will actually adjourn debate on this piece of legislation.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 77
Municipal Government (Restoring Tax
Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021

[Debate adjourned November 4: Ms Phillips speaking]

The Acting Speaker: The member who caught my eye to join debate is the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise and speak to Bill 77, Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021. I will begin by indicating that it is my intention to move an amendment.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just as it comes up there, I move that the motion for second reading of Bill 77, Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021, be amended by deleting all the words after "that" and substituting the following:

Bill 77, Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021, be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

As is normally the case, there will be copies of the amendment placed at each table close to the entrances there. You can also put up your hand if you would like a copy of it. For the purposes of debate, this will be referred to as REF1.

If the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View could please continue, with 13 and 50 remaining.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. What the amendment is intended to do is to refer the subject matter of this bill to a standing committee for further consideration. The issue the bill is intended to address is unpaid municipal taxes by industry. This is an issue which has been growing, admittedly, over the past number of years. This bill is coming forward, but it's coming forward rather too late to address the problem it intends to address. Due to the delay in introducing the bill, it may now be impossible for many of these municipalities to recoup the taxes because the companies have become what in the legal field they sometimes refer to as judgment proof, which is to say insolvent, so you can't collect against them even if you have a legal right to collect against them, because, well, you can't get something from nothing, I suppose.

Certainly, this is a concern. It's definitely a concern for municipalities. This bill probably should have been introduced sooner, but it was not. I think further conversations need to be had around this, among other reasons, because this is sort of part of a larger problem, if you will. I know the government is going to stand

up and say: we need to do this now; it's absolutely essential. Well, actually, you needed to do it two years ago.

But, anyway, now they introduce this legislation, which returns to an ineffective approach from the past while putting the burden of cost and enforcement on the municipalities. I think the concern here is that, you know, there was a way to do it. That way was removed. Now we've kind of gone back to the way it was in the past. We've done it too late. There are a lot of concerns with this bill, a lot of concerns that are worth talking through. Then the administration and implementation costs for these municipalities to recoup the lost tax revenues may ultimately not be worth the cost. I mean, this happens in all sectors, in all areas, right? It's often the case that if someone has sort of, quote, unquote, like, done you wrong, I guess, in a legal sense, even though you may have a right to recoup the money, it may not be worth recouping the money because the cost of doing so is exorbitant relative to the amount of money you would get back.

I mean, adding the ability to levy special liens on companies is a strategy. Municipal leaders have been asking for tools in addition to this, so this is one of the reasons we think we should be having this conversation. Again, this sort of takes us back to a tool that previously existed, but people asked for other tools, and those other tools are not contained in this bill.

9:40

One of the things, I think, that municipal leaders have raised is calling for the AER to prohibit issuing of licences to bad actors if they don't pay their taxes, which is reasonable. It's not in this legislation, nor has it been referenced, to the best of my knowledge. You know, once again, it's sort of a matter of: people have asked for something from this government, they've acted rather later than they ought to have, and they haven't done nearly as much as they ought to have. This is a theme. I think it's sort of a consistent theme that we see with this government. They have to be sort of dragged to do the absolute minimum.

We saw it, actually, just today with child care agreements. You know, parents have spent lots of money that they could have had in their pockets, that they probably could have used. This is a challenging time for many, and this government just delayed and delayed and delayed and delayed and delayed, and then they finally did the thing under much pressure from the public.

Now, we think – we think – they're going to do the same with respect to coal mining in the eastern slopes, but we still haven't found out because even though today was supposed to be the day, Mr. Speaker, that we finally got the report back . . .

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

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, a point of order has been called.

Point of Order
Relevance

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under 23(b)(i), (ii), and (iii),

speaks to matters other than

(i) the question under discussion,

the hon. member just talked about child care. It's a completely separate issue. She just finished talking about another bill that we were discussing. All this is great; the role and the responsibilities of the opposition are to oppose, but unfortunately for the speaker – who is doing an amazing job, just for the record – their job is also

to talk about the bill before the House, and it turns out that she was talking about two other issues that are not before the House.

So I would ask you, respectfully, Mr. Speaker, to direct the member to talk about the bill that's before the House instead of taking a walk down a whole bunch of random pathways that are not before the House at this particular time.

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-North West has risen to respond.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, I think you'll agree that the line of argument that the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View was following was what is known as comparing and looking for reference and looking for a pattern of behaviour. You know, to the hon. member who did bring up this point of order, perhaps it's a teaching moment for him to realize that, of course, you are looking at a way by which you can look at the reference and the way by which this government is approaching its job. I can tell you that, with the general public, with this Official Opposition, on so many issues they are simply approaching it in the very worst and wrong and incorrect way.

It's not a point of order. Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: I appreciate the arguments put forward by both sides of this House with regard to this. I do not find that it is a point of order. I would ask that the hon. member continue. We are on REF1.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View can continue.

Debate Continued

Ms Ganley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the point raised by my hon. colleague. I do not think it is maybe the first time in this place that someone has referenced a bill which illustrates a pattern of behaviour by a group of people, in this case the government, and how that pattern of behaviour may have been repeated elsewhere. I think, again, that the concern with this is exactly the same as the concern with those two issues that I raised. I appreciate that the government may be sensitive about delaying the report back from the coal panel, once again, in light of Albertans' stringent objections to their actions in that regard. I would be embarrassed, too.

But, Mr. Speaker, I think that with respect to this bill, we're seeing, again, the same thing. You know, the government delays for two years. For two years people have been asking for tools, and then they come back and provide them with the tool that existed before that people felt was insufficient. I mean, it's not nothing. It's a step in the right direction. I don't object on principle to giving municipalities this tool. It just seems like if you have a problem and you take two years to address the problem, maybe you could come up with something new or an explanation for why the new things that other people have proposed are not in here.

It feels like, to me, if you're given an assignment and you take two years to sort of answer the call, you should probably be able to come up with just a little bit more than the thing that existed before and people felt was inadequate then. Or, at minimum, if there's nothing better – perhaps there's nothing better in the entire universe; I sincerely doubt that, but maybe that's the position the government is taking, and that's why they've done it this way – if there is nothing more, then some sort of an explanation for why the tools and requests that have come from municipal leaders have not been allowed: I think that that's reasonable, you know.

I think that if people have come forward and said, "Here's this problem, and I'm not just coming to you with a problem; I'm coming to you with a suggestion for a solution," like the solution

that has been suggested – again, I'm not claiming to have any special insider knowledge here. I don't know what the sort of full scope of consequences is of allowing the AER to decline to provide a licence to a company that has failed to pay their taxes, whether that's the best policy solution. But what I do know is that a policy solution has been suggested and raised, and therefore I think that this government owes those individuals an answer as to why that wasn't the action taken.

I mean, that certainly probably isn't the only idea that has been raised. You know, there are municipal leaders across this province who are very well informed, very well versed in what their area of subject matter or expertise is, and I suspect they have raised many things with the minister. I think it's not unreasonable to ask of this government some sort of explanation as to why two years into examining the problem, they were only able to come up with a historical tool that everyone has said has a series of problems.

It's my understanding that currently there is upwards of \$200 million in outstanding unpaid taxes. I would be interested to know whether the government can provide us with an estimate of how much this would fix. Of the existing problem, how much would this fix, and how many of those companies have already long since gone under? I mean, for all we know, this tool may address less than 50 per cent of the problem. It may be, you know, more than half that nobody is able to recoup from.

This sort of challenge reoccurs in a lot of places, right? Once an entity has gone under, there is no one to sort of pay for their liability. We see that with orphan wells, which is a problem that is growing and was incredibly difficult to solve, admittedly incredibly difficult to solve when the price of oil was low. Now that the price of oil is high, we don't see the government taking steps to address that at all, and I think that that is potentially a concern because we don't know. We don't know whether this is the last boom or not. We don't know precisely what the international price of oil will do.

The government of Alberta doesn't really have that many policy levers to control that international price of oil despite the Minister of Energy's sort of self-congratulatory behaviour with respect to those international forces. I think the concern here is that we have a situation where municipalities are increasingly squeezed. The government has come in to address this one thing with this one tool, but they're doing nothing to address the massive cuts they've made to MSI. They're doing nothing to address the massive downloading that they've done of police costing onto many of these municipalities.

9:50

This government was elected claiming, you know, we're going to put more and more boots on the ground of RCMP, but they didn't pay for a single one of those boots. They came forward and forced municipalities. Incidentally, Mr. Speaker, it's worth noting that municipalities had this power. If they wanted to add additional RCMP officers to their jurisdiction, they could come forward and agree to pay that cost with the federal government and have as many additional officers as they wanted. But municipalities having that ability wasn't good enough for this government, so it sort of forced those additional costs onto the government, and then it took a victory lap on money that it was taking from municipalities, which I think is a bit of a huge concern.

In addition, I don't know that we have actually seen more boots on the ground. I certainly haven't heard from anyone that that's the case. I mean, maybe it's because at the same time that they're trying to get this massive influx of RCMP officers, they're also threatening their jobs. They're also saying: come to Alberta, where you may not be employed next year. I think it's – I don't know. What's happening to that money, Mr. Speaker: I would be very interested – I would be very interested – to know what happens to

that money that the government is collecting from the municipalities. And those municipalities: I mean, they don't have their own money, right? They get it from the taxpayers, so it's money that this government is collecting from Albertans. If they can't provide those boots on the ground, what are they doing with the money? That's the question I'd like to know the answer to. I bet it's the question that taxpayers and municipal leaders would also like to know the answer to. I would love to be surprised and get an answer to that question, but I will not hold my breath.

I think this is an attempt by this government to say . . .

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

We are on REF1 for Bill 77, Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021, and I see the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs has risen.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. How much time do I have here, if you don't mind?

The Acting Speaker: Fifteen.

Mr. McIver: Fifteen. Okay. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Unless there are some interventions, where we could potentially add another couple.

Mr. McIver: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, let me just say that there's quite a bit to unpack there with the interesting diatribe that we just heard. One of the good questions near the end of it was: what are they doing with the money? Well, it's an interesting question to ask, but what's always true, no matter who is in government, is that if you want to know what an Alberta government did with the money, you look at the audited financial reports from the year before because it's kind of the law that every penny has to be accounted for. Now, what can be different is whether you agree with how the money was spent or not. That member really opened up a hole that was pretty big because I can tell you that when the folks across the way were in government, there were lots of big questions about what they were doing with the money.

There was little stuff like paying somebody from Ontario to go change light bulbs in somebody's house or a shower head. There was stuff like not spending the money to defend the KXL pipeline, which could be responsible for tens or twenty or a hundred thousand jobs in Alberta. There could have been spending the money to fly the then Premier, now the Leader of the Opposition, down to Ottawa to pose for a picture and smile while the Prime Minister cancelled the pipeline that was severely important to Alberta's future and could have created literally hundreds of thousands of jobs. The then Premier, now Leader of the Opposition, stood there and smiled and said: yeah, I'm really happy about this, because they're killing a pipeline that's going to take away jobs from the people I'm responsible for.

The hon. member across the way opened that door, so I just thought I would walk through that door for a couple of minutes because that's kind of important, for people to remember what would happen if the folks across the aisle were ever over here. I do remember when they were here. They cost this province 180,000-plus jobs, \$60 billion, \$70 billion worth of investment that didn't just leave Alberta; it went to other places in the world that produce oil in an environmentally less responsible way than we do here in Alberta. They drove that money out through their policies and through their bad treatment and through their disrespect for the men and women that work in this province. That is a fact. So I guess that if there's somebody here who should be just a little bit sensitive about this, it's the folks across the aisle.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the member did say a couple of things I agree with, and I'll quote. She said that she has no insider knowledge – well, I think that was pretty obvious from the speech we just heard – and also said, “I don't know,” which is also pretty obvious from the speech we just heard. She said both of those things at least twice, so I'm just repeating what the hon. member said a couple of times.

The interesting thing here is that the folks over there want to send this off to committee. There are times when it's the right thing to send a bill or something that comes before this House off to committee, but not this time. Mr. Speaker. What they don't seem to – you know what? They have access to all the media releases. I mean, I know they have a crack team of Twitter researchers over there, but even this stuff makes it to Twitter, that when we released this legislation and our intention to bring it forward, the good folks from the rural municipalities of Alberta actually thought it was a good idea and said so publicly. Suddenly they're trying to take the position that the municipalities haven't been listened to, and I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, that they have been listened to.

The RMA did a report a few months ago saying that at that point, I think, there was \$245 million worth of unpaid property tax owed by oil and gas companies. That number would be different today because, obviously, since that was a few months ago, there have been payments made and there have been additional taxes probably accrued that probably haven't been paid. But they told me, Mr. Speaker, on several occasions when I met with them, both online through a Zoom call or something like that or face to face, that this was their number one issue, unpaid property taxes from oil and gas companies. And I believe them. They're smart, they're good at what they do, and this legislation comes as a result of listening to them.

They told me, which is why I know that, that they cannot be sure how much of that money still owing this is going to help them to collect. You know, the hon. member actually said a couple of things, that some of those companies may go out of business, and that's true. That's also the reason why this amendment is so tone deaf and so negative and so bad for rural municipalities in this province, because the more months you let go by before we give them this tool to collect the oil and gas property taxes that are unpaid, the more months you've got for companies to go under and become insolvent and have nothing to get to pay to those municipalities.

They don't get it over there. It occurs to me that they are so anxious to put oil and gas companies out of business, they actually don't care about who gets the money that those oil and gas companies owe, including the municipalities. Mr. Speaker, it's so incredibly obvious. Now, if I was a spiteful person, and I'm not, and if I didn't care about municipalities, and I do, that would make me like somebody that would bring this amendment forward, because the result of their amendment probably will be that more oil and gas companies will go out of business before they pay the taxes owed to the municipalities. So this thing they bring forward to spite municipalities actually makes it less possible for them to collect the taxes owed.

Now, something else that the hon. member said two or three times – and I probably won't get the words exactly right – suggested that this method of collecting taxes didn't work. That's actually not what the municipalities said. They actually asked for this method of collecting the taxes back. The folks across the aisle, if they'd done their homework, ought to know this, but I'll walk down memory lane a little bit because this is actually pertinent to this piece of legislation and pertinent to the amendment that the opposition put on the floor. The fact is that in 2019 there was a decision in the courts called the Virginia Hills decision, where an oil and gas company

fought their need to pay their property taxes to a municipality, and the courts of this great province ruled in their favour.

10:00

Now, the courts of this great province did not say that a special levy was illegal. They didn't even say that it was a bad idea. They just said that the special levy that was in place was not specific enough. That's what the court said. So one of the things the municipalities said was: why don't you put the special levy back in place and make it more specific so that we can collect the taxes like we used to before the special levy went away? It wasn't, like the hon. member said, that it wasn't working. Quite the opposite. It was working just fine, and when the special levy went away, that's when the unpaid oil and gas taxes went through the roof, which is a pretty good indication it was exactly what was working, which is exactly why we're bringing it back, because it works.

Mr. Speaker, listen, there's no guarantee we've got this right, but I can tell you we put a lot of effort into this, and people in the administration smarter than me looked at it and said: how can we put the special levy back in place and make it more specific so that it's consistent with what the court said we had to do? Again, they didn't say that a special levy was a bad idea; they said that a special levy that wasn't very specific was a bad idea. If we've got it right – and I sincerely hope we do, and I believe we do because people smarter than me did the legal work on this – we put a special levy back in place that is very much more specific about what municipalities can put a levy on and what they cannot put a levy on in order to collect their property taxes.

In fact, there's another court case, the Redwater case, that puts environmental recoveries through the court at the top of the collection list for everybody regardless of everything else. But this actually puts – the government was first before then, till Redwater. Now the environmental issues to collect from a company are at the top. The government of Alberta or governments in general, Alberta and Canada, are next, and after that will be the municipalities through the special levy. When they're that high up on the list, then that would make them able to collect property taxes from oil and gas companies that owe those property taxes like they used to. When that right went away through the court decision, that's when the property taxes owed that were unpaid built up to the almost \$250 million level. This is what municipalities asked for.

Now, I guess that over there they can say: well, you could have done other things. Sure, we could have done a thousand other things, but this is a proven – not unproven, as the other side said – method that municipalities used for years to collect their property taxes. Not only that, but it's pretty consistent with what the oil and gas companies actually applied to their wells with a set of rules that included the municipalities' ability to collect through the special levy. So it's actually not even unfair to the oil and gas companies, and both CAPP and EPAC said publicly, when we brought out this legislation, that they agree with it, that they think it's a reasonable way to get back to what is normal.

So here we are. We've got a way for municipalities to collect the money that they are owed, that they desperately need, that they want, that they asked for, and that we listened to them on not once but several times. We're trying to give municipalities what they asked for, and the opposition says: "Oh, no. Don't do what municipalities want. We want you to send it off to committee." Meanwhile we don't know how many other oil and gas companies will go under and will have no money to pay, and then municipalities will never be able to recover. I guess, as I said earlier, if I was a vindictive person, I'd wish they'd win this amendment because, actually, at this point even the fact they tried to make this amendment tells me that rural municipalities should never vote for

anybody running under the NDP banner because they obviously don't care about the municipalities being able to collect the taxes that they're owed.

Yet they stood up in this House and made that amendment. How embarrassing. How out of touch, how tone deaf, how insensitive to the needs of rural municipalities in Alberta could the NDP be to make this amendment? No, Mr. Speaker, I will not be supporting this amendment. I will recommend respectfully to my colleagues on the government side not to support this amendment. In fact, I'll respectfully appeal to anybody who is thinking anywhere else that's not on this side of the House to vote against this amendment because this is clearly an attack on Alberta's rural municipalities, full stop, and I won't be supporting it.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

I see the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall has risen to join debate.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That was interesting to watch. The Virginia Hills decision, that the minister referred to, was handed down by the Court of Appeal in February 2019. They became government on April 30 – I think it was at the end of April or in May – and then for all those months they didn't do anything. In 2019 they didn't do anything. They were busy attacking municipalities in other ways. In 2020 they didn't do anything. They were busy cutting the municipal sustainability initiative, off-loading policing costs onto municipalities, and hurting them in every possible way.

Now, at the end of 2021, after almost 30 months, they are taking some action and are not even willing to listen to the feedback that Albertans have to say about this, what municipalities have to say about this piece of legislation. The minister spent 15 minutes without saying one single useful thing: who he has talked to, who he has consulted, what he has done about the concerns. I have heard representatives from the municipalities, that they want this government to use the AER process to stop those bad actors who owe taxes from getting new licences. The minister has not responded as to why he didn't choose that route.

These taxes: that's the municipalities' money. Municipalities are owed these taxes. If after 30 months the government decided to do something, a half-baked solution, they should have worked with the municipalities. They could have made sure that the process they are putting in place will ensure that municipalities are able to collect those unpaid taxes. They are owed those taxes.

Now that it has reached a crisis situation, the government is doing exactly what they have been doing on other files, acting last and doing the least. That has been their policy ever since they became government, and because of this delay it is now impossible for many municipalities to recoup those taxes owed to them because some of those companies are not there anymore. This legislation in no way, shape, or manner helps them.

10:10

Had this government not waited for 30 months for this situation to reach a crisis point, some of those municipalities may have been able to recover some of those taxes owed to them. Municipalities have been asking this government to take action on it. They didn't. I think that municipalities have suggested some other ways as well, but here the minister thinks he knows best, and that's why he has come up with this legislation, which may or may not work for many municipalities.

As I said, municipal leaders are calling for a process through the Alberta Energy Regulator where, if companies are owing taxes to municipalities, they shouldn't be issued further licences. The minister didn't address any of those concerns. Somehow they're not

even willing to refer this bill to a committee to listen to those concerns, to explore those concerns. It's a lot of money for these municipalities that's at stake here. We must get it right and give municipalities every tool so they can collect these unpaid taxes. [interjection] I will give way.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you. I appreciate the hon. member giving me a minute. You know, we have a very unique opportunity here to talk about this very bill in the next few days because, of course, we have the AUMA and then, the subsequent week, the RMA. I just wanted to know if the hon. member was planning to attend. You know, will we be canvassing this bill at those two events, and is that a useful use of time and the time that we're holding this bill now so that we can take it to those two places to see if it holds up and stands the test of hundreds of scrutinizing eyes that need the money to run their municipalities?

Mr. Sabir: Thank you to my colleague for that important question. Certainly, I will be attending, and municipal leaders from across the province will be gathering there. I will be engaging in conversations on this particular issue and on all issues that matter to them. I have reached out to some of the new council colleagues in Calgary as well and to those who got elected elsewhere. I think that they have many things that they want this government to listen to.

The minister was earlier talking about tone-deafness. I think that when you hear the concerns and hear the response of this government that municipal leaders are getting, that kind of fits the definition of tone deaf. In Calgary, for instance, they have cut funding from the municipal sustainability initiative, they have cut funding from their policing grants, they have taken more revenues from tickets, and they have taken more revenues from cannabis sales. I think municipalities are really suffering under this government because this government is completely tone deaf to their concerns. They didn't get the support that they needed during this pandemic.

Even in the pandemic the government will act last and do the least so that they can get an announcement and some photo op out of it. That's all they have done. They have not listened to or worked with the municipal leaders on the ground dealing with the problem of these unpaid taxes every single day. Because of this delay of this UCP government, now that amount has grown to over \$200 million.

Had the government acted early on during their mandate, this problem would not get to this crisis situation. Now that they decided to do something, they are still refusing to listen to this side of the House. They are refusing to listen to Albertans, municipal leaders, and new leadership that has emerged as a result of the October 18 election.

They have not done the homework. That is why we are asking that this bill be referred to the committee and we explore other solutions put forward by the municipalities such as using AER to help them collect these taxes and any other proposals and solutions that may come from the municipal leaders who got elected recently, on October 18. There will be an opportunity to get it right, and I think we can get it done quickly as well. It doesn't have to wait another 30 months, like the government waited to bring this bill forward.

So with that, I will urge all members of the Legislature to support this very common-sense and needed and necessary referral motion. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. member who caught my eye now is the hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've had some very fulsome debate going back and forth. The minister that brought forward this bill: he's not a newbie. I don't know how else to say it. He's one of those seasoned veterans that's been around for a while, been there, done that, specifically on that municipal file. I have a ton of respect for the minister. I know I'm not supposed to say that I don't have as much respect for the members opposite because that may be on a borderline, but as far as their experience I have a lot more respect for the members on this aisle given the file that we're talking about.

Still I'm struggling sometimes. I still see myself as kind of a rookie in here, but I think I've been around for two years now and kind of understand a stall tactic when I see one. Now, the problem that I struggle with, though, on these stall tactics – and they're one of the things that you'll see that opposition parties will do. What they'll do is that they'll try to kick things back to committee. Now, that's a fancy way of dragging out something that's pretty decent, typically, or if they completely disagree for ideological reasons or whatever, Twitter feed points they need to make or anything else, then they might do that, but if there was something that was really serious, I could maybe get onside of that.

One of the things that was given to me as a newly elected person – at the first parade I ever did, there was this one gentleman. He said: make sure when you get in there that if there are good ideas, you guys talk about them. He had pointed out what Premier Lougheed had done before he was actually the Premier. What caught his eye was that when other items were being brought up, they gave way to it. They actually considered it. They would talk about the items and say: well, you know, maybe we can offer some improvement.

Mr. Speaker, I haven't heard one lick of improvement being offered here. All I've heard is that we need to consult more. Now, we've already had a lot of latitude talking about a pattern, a pattern of behaviour. That seemed to be the opposition's favourite pattern – stall it out – even when they weren't the opposition: drag things out, the act of nonparticipation, if you would, by being here.

There are so many files that I could start to get into, but the energy file? Seriously? Just so that folks understand at home, this is Bill 77, the Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021, so what that means loosely translated is: let's put a bill in place that allows the municipalities, predominantly rural municipalities, to collect the taxes that are owed to them by some of the delinquent oil and gas sector that we have.

10:20

Now, the interesting thing about the oil and gas sector is that they took a hit. The opposition would have you believe that this was something that was completely out of their control and out of their wheelhouse. I've heard them pontificate, wondering why there are so many people leaving the province. They're going to other jurisdictions where this is still supported. We're sitting in a country where our own Prime Minister is basically trying to put us on the death knells, and to some of the comments earlier: they're ready to stand up and take photo ops with them. So, on one hand, they'll make you believe that they're really, really for the energy sector, but they're up to the same old tricks, the same stuff.

This is literally a chance for municipalities to get the back taxes that they needed, that decent energy players have already been given a reprieve for. This is to clean up both sides of the equation. You know what happened, Mr. Speaker? When we had – and I would argue to say that it wasn't the best thing. I kind of put it as that when we first came out about this, talking about the linear assessment, you would have heard the other side going nonstop about how we messed that up. Here's what I kind of put to our own minister at the time. I

said that, you know, it's kind of one of those things. It's like you took a bag of cats, shook them all out and threw them on the table, and we all had to figure it out. It was kind of a bad deal.

This is not. This is through consultation of that process, that we talked about – the energy sector, the oil and gas companies, and the municipalities – that came up with something that was middle of the road, that everybody could work with, meaning that you can keep those companies still in business, still paying their taxes, still paying for the things that we need in rural Alberta. But, instead, what we're going to do – we're on an amendment right now, so I guess I've got to speak to the amendment instead of speaking to the actual bill that we should be putting back in the House so that we can get taxes paid, make sure that we have a sustainable industry and keep the lights on.

Now, to hear the NDP talking about how they stand up for rural Alberta, wow. You want to come into my backyard and talk about how that's your main concern and how you understand it better than anybody else? I don't know. I seem to remember this Bill 6 thing. I seem to remember tractors rolling up the driveway out here at the Leg. And if anyone hasn't been here, if you roll a four-wheel drive John Deere up there, she's a little snug in the corners. So the folks that actually came out here said: "Yeah. You're really listening to us? Not a chance."

Bill 77 allows municipalities to collect those unpaid property taxes. The vast majority of oil and gas is onside with this and that they do pay their taxes and that there are some delinquent ones. [interjection] Members opposite are heckling, and it's good because I'm giving them the gears. At least maybe this one won't come out on CBC. They'll actually listen to what the debate is here, so this is good.

In February Rural Municipalities surveyed 69 members and found that \$245 million in unpaid property taxes were owing from oil and gas companies. Yeah. It's on the books. This is going to help facilitate both sides to get that back in the coffers. So why would we delay it anymore? Because we need more people... [interjection] I'm not going to give way this time. Normally I would, but this one: I'm on a good roll right now. I'm going to let 'er rip. That was a 42 per increase from the previous year. Half of this is unpaid by Alberta companies currently operating while they're facing insolvency.

We need to facilitate something, so back again to the minister's point. If he wanted to go through with this and if he was really facetious, he would allow this to fail. We don't want that. We want our country to thrive. We want our province to thrive, and if we can put in some common-sense legislation that helps facilitate that, to keep the lights on at home in those rural municipalities – these

aren't just foreign companies that work in these areas. They're the friends and neighbours and relatives right down the road. This is the sustainability. We're talking about keeping rural sustainable. This is part of it.

Bill 77 helps municipalities by restoring special liens to give municipalities priority over creditors, to receive taxes owed. In addition, the government would help municipalities avoid significant losses right now by extending the provincial education requisition credit program throughout 2023-24. Oh, so it's also going to help pay for education. Yeah. We'd better go to committee on that one and put it back and debate it and bring in how many more people. You want to hear one of the main pillars? We're jumping up and down for education, but we don't know how we're paying for it. So it's one of those things we need to do.

This could put some strain on the oil and gas companies that are already having a tough time finding creditors. That's why this government is providing a 35 per cent cost reduction of property taxes for the shallow gas wells and associated pipelines in 2019, eliminated the well drilling equipment tax, and provided a tax holiday for those new wells and associated pipelines until 2024.

Pretty common sense, again, from both sides, Mr. Speaker, so for the life of me, I don't understand why we want to push against this, I don't understand why we have to keep dragging it back to committee, and I don't understand why it's a stall tactic. Why is it a stall tactic to do something like this? So for the love of Pete and anybody else out there with a similar name, please let's get back to the main bill. Let's stop the posturing here, and let's just get going.

With that, I would like to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Deputy Government House Leader has risen.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise, but at this time, after a long day of work, I move that we adjourn the Assembly until 10 a.m. Thursday, November 16, 2021.

An Hon. Member: Tuesday.

Mr. Schow: Good catch. I've made two mistakes today. I move that we adjourn the Assembly until Tuesday, tomorrow morning at 10 a.m. Thank you.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 10:27 p.m.]

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