



Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday afternoon, November 18, 2024

Day 68

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 31st Legislature

First Session

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van Dijken, Glenn, Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock (UC), Deputy Chair of Committees

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Yaseen, Hon. Muhammad, ECA, Calgary-North (UC)
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Party standings:

United Conservative: 49

New Democrat: 37

Vacant: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, November 18, 2024

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

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

Hon. members, it being the first sitting day of the week, we will now be led in the singing of our national anthem by Sidney Manning. I invite you to participate in the language of your choice.

Hon. Members:

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

Indigenous Land Acknowledgement

The Speaker: The Legislative Assembly is grateful to be situated on Treaty 6 territory. This land has been the traditional region of the Métis people of Alberta, the Inuit, and the ancestral territory of the Cree, Dene, Blackfoot, Saulteaux, Iroquois, and Nakota Sioux people. The recognition of our history on this land is an act of reconciliation, and we honour those who walk with us. We also acknowledge that the province of Alberta exists within treaties 4, 7, 8, and 10 territories and the Métis Nation of Alberta.

Please be seated.

Statement by the Speaker

Members' Fifth Anniversary of Election

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we proceed to the rest of the daily Routine, I'd like to take a moment and acknowledge a few members here inside the Chamber who have served five years or so. As it turns out, I found out last week from a number of you that it was slightly beyond five years. Since being elected in 2019, the members have endured 319 question periods. They've heard 13,215 questions asked. I'll leave it up to the members to determine how many of that 13,000 were answered. There are quite a number who will be recognized today, so we're going to do this in two different groups by caucus.

I'd like to invite the hon. members for Edmonton-Meadows, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, and Edmonton-Whitemud to the dais for their pins. They will be available for individual photos immediately following the daily Routine, should anyone want one.

Hon. members, I would now like to invite the members for Airdrie-Cochrane, Calgary-Bow, Calgary-Cross, Calgary-East, Calgary-North, Calgary-North East, Calgary-Peigan, Calgary-Shaw, Calgary-South East, Camrose, Cardston-Siksika, Drumheller-Stettler, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, Highwood, Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland,

Lethbridge-East, Maskwacis-Wetaskiwin, Morinville-St. Albert, Peace River, Red Deer-North, Red Deer-South, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain, Strathcona-Sherwood Park, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright, West Yellowhead, and Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche to please proceed to the dais and grab your pin on the way by.

Since being elected, these members have been through six budgets, five throne speeches, 4,134 documents tabled, and 248 bills introduced.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: Hon. members, it's my absolute honour and pleasure to introduce a special visitor joining us in the Chamber this afternoon. First, earlier today I had the absolute honour of hosting the consul general of the Philippines, Emma Sarne. She was recently appointed the consul general in Calgary. Prior to this post she served as the minister and consul general of the Philippines embassy in Cambodia. We had a wonderful discussion. I know that many members here inside the Assembly worked closely with her predecessor, and she hopes that she will have an equally productive relationship with members of the Assembly. I invite Emma to please rise. She is joined with her husband today. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont has a school group today.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you three home-school families from my riding, the Archer, Mould, and Solomon families. I had a chance to chat with them earlier. They're very excited to join us today. I ask them to rise and please receive the warm welcome of the House.

Mr. Haji: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to rise and introduce St. Cecilia junior high school students and their teachers here. They are students of one of the 10 junior highs in Edmonton-Decore, one of the 10 schools of the Catholic school board. I ask students and educators to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you the students and teacher Jordan Zadunayski of Sister Alphonse academy. I ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Hon. members, joining us in the Speaker's gallery today – you met him last week and received his bio then. Mr. Sidney Manning was our anthem singer today. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation.

1:40

Mr. Sigurdson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you some incredible guests. Alberta Lung breathing space representatives are here with us today. I'd like to thank them for the work that they do every year and also the support that they gave me for my organ and tissue donation private member's Bill 205.

As well, we have guests from Alberta Canola because today is Alberta canola advocacy day. Please rise, all of you, and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Member Boparai: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Japinder Gill. Born and raised in Calgary, representing the northeast with an undergrad from the University of Calgary and a law degree with honours from the U.K., she's an active member of the Law Society of Alberta, a dedicated volunteer since age 13. She now mentors others in the community. I ask that she rise to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have someone who's more than just a constituent; she's a very important person. Who knows? Maybe I'll have more to report next time she's here. If I could ask Jocelyn Falconer to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: Are there other introductions? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to introduce folks from Uncles & Aunts at Large, which is a nonprofit in the riding of Edmonton-Glenora. It's been serving single-parent families for over 50 years. It's their anniversary. I ask that the folks who are here today rise. Alice, Susan, Moira, Sue, Rebecca, and Lynn, thank you for all you do to serve our community.

Members' Statements

COP 29 Climate Change Conference

Ms Pitt: Mr. Speaker, last week thousands of climate activists and government officials from around the world came together in Baku, Azerbaijan, for the annual Conference of the Parties, better known as COP 29. Some, however, came to advocate for so-called global energy transition and the dangerous phase-out of fossil fuels, but common sense had a voice at the table at this conference. Our Minister of Environment and Protected Areas of Alberta went to Baku to represent and defend Alberta on the world stage and tell our story of environmental stewardship and responsible energy production as one of North America's largest producers.

She told the story of how Alberta is increasing production, meeting global energy demands all while emissions in methane, electricity, and per-barrel oil and gas intensities are all in decline. Alberta continues to lead the way as Canada's environmental leader without federal energy cap productions or costly carbon taxes. We as Albertans should be proud; we shouldn't be apologetic. The world needs to hear our story. While the NDP and the Liberals disregard the fact that global energy demand continues to rise, countries from around the world are coming to Alberta for a partner that they can trust.

It's part of the reason our Premier made history last week, becoming the first non-U.S. state to be invited to join the U.S. energy pact. We know conferences like COP for too many years have been hijacked by climate extremists and ideological politicians like Steven Guilbeault to spread their agenda to shut down fossil fuel regardless of reality or the impacts to regular people around the world.

We are proud to have a minister of environment so willing to fight back and be vocal at these conferences to stand up for our economy, the importance of energy security, and the livelihoods of all Albertans in this great province. Alberta can be and should be the world's responsible producer of choice. Our government will

continue to advocate for Alberta energy unapologetically and stand up against Ottawa's activist agenda here at home.

Thank you.

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

AIMCo Governance

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Conservatives are at it again, down the road of going after Albertans' hard-earned retirement security, all so they can have a bigger piggy bank to play their partisan investment strategies, a strategy that has been attempted time and time again.

We don't have to look too far back to the days of Premier Alison Redford and her then Finance minister Doug Horner – name sound familiar? – when they did try to gut the retirement security of more than 400,000 Albertans, including current and retired teachers, nurses, municipal employees, postsecondary education workers, and police officers. It didn't work that time, and the pension holders stood together and forced the government to change course.

Now, it's clear the government has learned from this mistake, and maybe the now Finance minister did call his family and asked for some advice and had to be a little bit sneakier or more disingenuous so that Albertans don't see it coming this time.

But I can promise you, Mr. Speaker, that Albertans are not dumb when it comes to their retirement security. So when the Minister of Finance decided to fire the AIMCo board and pretend it was about mismanagement and appointed himself to run the investment, people started to pay attention. Then the rumours started that PM Stephen Harper will be appointed, the same person who on record has said that he wants an APP, not a CPP, who created a two-tiered pension plan for public service workers while in government and – let's not forget – also increased the eligibility of CPP to 67.

It's time this government was honest, Mr. Speaker. Firing the AIMCo board wasn't about staffing or returns on investment. It was about removing the nonpartisan wall and replacing it with a person who will gut the public pension and put Albertans' retirements at risk.

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

Governors' Coalition for Energy Security

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week Alberta made a bold move to grow our energy sector and strengthen economic partnerships with our neighbours to the south. By joining the Governors' Coalition for Energy Security, Alberta is stepping forward as a vital contributor to a secure and a sustainable energy future for North America.

Alberta has long been a reliable partner to the United States, providing essential oil and natural gas to fuel their economy. By expanding our energy ties with the U.S. and promoting cross-border energy trade and participation, Alberta is helping to build upon its North American energy strategy.

Alberta already accounts for 56 per cent of all oil imports to the U.S. That's more than twice the amount as Mexico, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq combined, which is helping to drive job creation and prosperity on both sides of the border.

Natural gas also plays an important role in North America's energy mix. Alberta is the largest producer of natural gas in Canada and remains positioned to support the U.S. in filling their domestic supply gaps. Alberta's leadership in emissions reduction and advancements in clean energy technology set a gold standard.

Alberta is also unlocking its untapped geological potential to help meet the world's demand for minerals, many of which are used to

manufacture batteries, cellphones, and other products used in our everyday lives. This includes the province's lithium sector, where Alberta's government is supporting several innovative projects to develop new ways to extract and concentrate lithium faster and more efficiently.

Through collaboration in this coalition we will share our expertise and our innovation, building a future that drives economic growth and environmental stewardship. This partnership isn't just about energy; it's about opportunity. It's about creating jobs, driving investment, and positioning Alberta as a global leader in energy security. This agreement deepens those ties, ensuring energy remains affordable, reliable, and environmentally responsible for families across the continent.

We're sending a clear message: Alberta is open for business, and we are ready to lead.

Karsten Heuer

Dr. Elmeligi: This last weekend I was one of hundreds of Albertans who gathered in Canmore to remember a love and a life truly lived to its fullest. Karsten Heuer, biologist, conservation activist, explorer, writer, and change-maker passed away earlier this month. Like many people, Karsten was a man of great, big ideas. Unlike most, he implemented them, turned them into tangible actions that often exceeded his own visions.

Karsten is most known for walking and skiing from Yellowstone to Yukon, stimulating a paradigm shift in landscape ecology, and positioning Alberta as a global leader in large landscape conservation and connectivity. With his wife, Leanne, he followed a herd of caribou 1,500 kilometres from Yukon to their calving grounds in Alaska. He paddled from Canmore to Newfoundland with Leanne and their son Zev to meet Farley Mowat, and he was a leader in bringing bison back to Banff national park after 140 years of their absence. With each of these massive undertakings he created ways to share it with us. He wrote books. Leanne and he made award-winning films. They brought the wilds of Canada to the public, the politicians, and the decision-makers.

Karsten was a rare person who somehow expertly weaved biology, community outreach, art, and outdoor exploration into activism to create a better world and protect our precious ecosystems and wildlife. He did this humbly, with a kindness and a passion that inspired many, including me. At the foundation of this work was Karsten's spiritual connection to Canada's wilderness. His stories shared a love for the land that was strung through his DNA. Working closely with Treaty 7 First Nations, he brought bison and Indigenous people back to the lands of their ancestors, making an ecosystem whole again.

Karsten was a colleague, teacher, and friend. I carry his legacy with me in this House each time I stand up for Alberta wildlife, our nature-loving communities, and the decisions we need to make to build a better future by restoring and connecting large landscapes.

1:50

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The Leader of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition has question 1.

AIMCo Governance

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, AIMCo manages \$170 billion of Albertans' assets. These are Albertans' heritage savings trust fund and pensions. This money is not supposed to form a gambling pet project for the Premier, but the Premier has now harmed how secure those investments are by firing the chair, the board, and the CEO of

AIMCo and replacing them all with her own Finance minister. This unprecedented action has absolutely damaged AIMCo's reputation and stunned industry experts. Why is the Premier risking the retirement savings of more than 350,000 Albertans, and will she stop the political interference?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier has the call.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. AIMCo's mandate remains unchanged, and investments will continue to be made at arm's length from the government. We take a returns-first mindset. Unfortunately, as we looked at the increase in costs: 71 per cent increase in salary, wages, and benefits; 96 per cent increase in third-party management fees; 29 per cent increase in employees; and they consistently failed to meet their benchmarks. As the Finance minister has said, the reason you get paid the big bucks is to get the returns, and we believe that we can do better under new management.

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, in a report in the *Globe and Mail* three sources have said this Premier wanted Stephen Harper to run AIMCo. She passed this along to the Ethics Commissioner, they claim. But according to the same article the Ethics Commissioner's report raised major flags. This Premier has since replaced that Ethics Commissioner with her own hand-picked choice, a person who used to work for her office and who ran for a UCP nomination. Can the Premier confirm if the news report is true? Did her government have the previous Ethics Commissioner vet Stephen Harper to be on the board of AIMCo? Yes or no?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't want to prejudge the outcome of the decision-making process the Finance minister is going through in finding replacement board members. As soon as those board members are revealed to the public, we'd be happy to answer any questions on any of them. But at the moment, as you know, the Finance minister remains the sole board member, and the deputy minister has left his position and now he is there as the interim CEO. We'll have more to say when we have appointments to announce.

Ms Gray: That wasn't the question I asked.

The Albertans who have AIMCo as their pension investors, including teachers who were forced into AIMCo against their will, have serious concerns with the political intervention in their pensions. Now, the government has cut the arms off this arm's-length organization by putting the Finance minister directly in control. The Finance minister told the *Edmonton Sun*, quote: it became evident things were not going to change even with constant pressure from me and the team. Why did the Finance minister apply, quote, "constant pressure" on AIMCo, which is supposed to be arm's length from government?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Ms Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. When we look around the world, looking at, for instance, the Norway sovereign wealth fund, it has almost \$2 trillion under investment, and it has a lower number of staff members and a lower cost profile because they invest it in a different way. We had to look at that and see whether the management and the significant fees and the significant staff were yielding the kind of investment returns that AIMCo itself had benchmarked, and they fell short. So what we're going to do is have the Finance minister in an interim way and new board members announced shortly.

The Speaker: The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition for her second set of questions.

Unemployment and Job Creation

Ms Gray: Everybody knows that the UCP government can't get health and education services right, but this government has also failed on the economic front. The cost of living due to high inflation is making things hard for every Albertan. Alberta's unemployment rate is still the highest west of the Maritimes. The Business Council of Alberta has said, quote: unemployment has stayed high for quite a while, and I think at this point there is really no charitable view of that. Why has this Premier failed to focus on Alberta's high unemployment rate and growing the economy? Instead, why is she chasing chemtrail conspiracies?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the things that we noticed when we did our Alberta Is Calling campaign is that a lot of people wanted to come to Alberta. We had 160,000 people who came in 2023, and we're on track to have 200,000 people come in 2024. Of course, when people arrive, there's a period of time that they are looking for work, and that's part of the reason why we have sustained higher unemployment levels. We do know and the federal government has finally accepted that they have to take a more responsible approach to bringing in newcomers from all streams, and I think that we'll see some mitigation on that unemployment over time.

Ms Gray: Many business organizations are worried about the damage this government is doing to the economy, and now, after expressing their concerns, these business groups like the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers and the Chamber of Commerce are under attack by her boss, Pierre Poilievre, Conservative leader. Poilievre called these groups "worse than useless" and "money-sucking lobby groups." On this side we disagree with a lot that Mr. Poilievre has to say. Does the Premier plan on defending these business groups from attacks, or does she agree with Mr. Poilievre that groups like CAPP and the Chamber of Commerce are worse than useless?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. On this side of the House the provincial conservative party is a completely different entity than the federal Conservative Party, unlike the members opposite, where, when you buy a membership in the provincial party, you are automatically supporting Jagmeet Singh at the federal level. Quite frankly, when you look at their economic record, they should be embarrassed that they're even asking us about this. They had 13 quarters of out-migration, they lost 183,000 jobs within the first couple of years in government, and we've seen nothing but continued job growth since we came in.

Ms Gray: I didn't hear the Premier disagree with a word that has come out of Mr. Poilievre's mouth.

Speaking of things that will hurt our economy, the words of the Premier's other boss and party organizer, David Parker, about Alberta are disgusting. He said Albertans should be proud of the "white culture" that is "the air you breathe and the water you swim in," and he called white culture "our civilization" and "our economic system." For Albertans who built this province to be reflective of our diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, and beautiful

cultures, these sentiments are unacceptable. Does the Premier share her boss's views, or will she apologize?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that the members opposite don't read the newspapers, but they may have read that the individual they referenced actually worked against me in my leadership campaign. They understand and my caucus understands that we work for Albertans, and that is going to be who we have constantly in our sights as we're passing good policy. It's part of the reason, since January 2024, that Alberta has added 30,300 jobs, which is a total increase of 1.2 per cent since the beginning of the year. People come from a variety of backgrounds, and we are very pleased they're choosing Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition for a third set of questions.

Health System Reform

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, this Premier promised to fix health care in just 90 days. Now, for the record that was two years and 29 days ago. Just today the Health minister rolled out the only bit of news we've seen, which is that the agency has a new logo. Albertans are waiting endlessly for care, they can't find family doctors, and our emergency rooms are swelling beyond the capacity that staff can handle. Why is the government focused on a new logo instead of patients?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have made incredible progress on making sure that we address the needs of Albertans, number one, by expanding out primary care to ensure that we have nurse practitioners able to work to the full scope of practice. We also have our pharmacies, which have the largest scope of practice in the entire country. We'll be rolling out a new model for combined care for our primary care doctors. We also have been investing in surgical suite upgrades, \$313 million over three years on 10 projects. We've affirmed charter surgical centres, which has also added new capacity on surgeries. We're heading in the right direction.

Ms Gray: And yet the health care system that Albertans are experiencing is giant wait times and more chaos and crisis. In Lethbridge not a single person can find a family doctor in that city, and to top it off, the Premier can't sign a deal with doctors or make one that ensures nurses are well paid. Mr. Speaker, why has this government failed to fix health care at all, never mind in the 90-day timeline that the Premier herself promised to Albertans?

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, in Lethbridge – I'd like to correct the record – we've gone from 40,000 without a family doctor down to 20,000. We're going to ensure that every single person in Alberta has a primary care practitioner. That is the objective that I have given to the Health minister, and she is well on her way.

I should mention, Mr. Speaker, that under the NDP wait times for open-heart surgery increased 50 per cent, cataract and hip replacement surgery went up 30 per cent, and knee replacement surgery waits climbed 23 per cent. What we're seeing with all of these measures is that they're on their way down, and they're going to continue that way.

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, I just heard the Premier say she's proud that 1 in 5 Albertans don't have a family doctor, a million Albertans. The situation is so bad in health care that the minister doesn't even know what's going on. Today she was asked if cancer patients are getting timely care. She admitted that, under this government's watch, for many patients things have gotten worse. Now, we all know this Premier has publicly stated her belief that cancer patients only have themselves to blame, but will she accept the blame for the incompetence of a health care system that has only gotten worse for Alberta cancer patients here in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I mean, I think something that both sides of this House can take credit for is that we've got a brand new cancer centre in Calgary. It took a couple of years for us to be able to bring it to the point where we've got all of the equipment and we've hired all of the staff, and we're continuing to recruit oncologists. It's unrolling in the exact time frame that is normal for purposing a brand new facility. I'm excited about the fact that more people are going to want to choose Alberta because of the research capacity that we have at the cancer centre. I think this is an exciting new era for cancer treatment in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills has a question to ask.

AIMCo Governance (continued)

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we heard last week, the Minister of Finance made the unprecedented move to remove the chair and entire board of AIMCo along with the CEO and members of the executive team. The minister tells us that this reset is necessary to rein in executive salaries, yet just one year ago this government passed legislation to remove salary caps from those serving on boards and commissions, including the members of the AIMCo board, hardly setting an example that they care about salaries. Will the minister explain how, under his watch and after removing all the rules to cap salaries, he was unable to keep those salaries in check?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's true. A lot of changes happened with AIMCo two weeks ago, I guess, now. Ultimately, I'm the minister that's responsible to this Legislature and to Albertans for AIMCo, and we've exercised that authority to restore confidence and stability. It is very true that much of our rationale around this was around the costs at AIMCo. The Premier has already mentioned the increase in salaries, wages, and benefits. We've seen the external management fees increase a great deal. We're making these changes for Albertans' pension plans and Albertans at large.

Mr. Ellingson: As we just heard, the minister has told us that this reckless move to appoint himself as the chair and sole director is to restore confidence and stability in AIMCo. This government's decision has done the opposite and has sent shockwaves through the investment community, calling into question the independence of AIMCo to operate without government interference. Can the minister tell us how, after five years of lapsed oversight from the board, invoking the nuclear option was the only solution to a problem this government created?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, this certainly wasn't a problem that this government created. If you look at the Mandate and Roles Document for AIMCo, this reset will involve largely the same document. It's built around three core things: great returns, continuing to be and being a low-cost provider for pension plans, and also that client relationship, having that client relationship where they know who they work for and how they're going to complete their task. The new Mandate and Roles Document will be largely the same but with that relationship in mind.

Mr. Ellingson: So you appointed the board members and removed the salary caps, but not your problem. Got it.

More than 350,000: the number of pensioners that rely on the stability and stewardship of their pensions, Albertans that expect a stable return providing for their pension that they depend on every day. A lifetime of work for this province, a lifetime of educating our kids, keeping us healthy, and now this government believes that those pensions are their political tool. Can the minister explain to the people of Alberta how he and he alone should be managing \$170 billion and the future of . . .

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, as I made clear, in my very short time in this caretaker role I will not be making any investment decisions from this board position. What I will say is that the member is correct about the importance of this for the people that hold those pension plans. My predecessor before me and me in this short time in this role have received various complaints, formal and informal, from the pension plans themselves about the cost trajectory at AIMCo. We're doing this for them to ensure that they're a low-cost provider. We're doing this for all Albertans regarding the management of the heritage trust fund.

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

Trade with Mexico

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yet again this Premier is starting another political fight at the expense of Alberta farmers. This time she wants to fight with Mexico. The Premier wants to remove Mexico from the North American trade agreement without considering the impact on the economy and especially Alberta's agriculture producers. Trade between Alberta and Mexico totalled \$2.9 billion in 2023, and agriculture and agrifood accounts for more than 80 per cent of our exports. Why is the Premier jeopardizing billions of dollars of Alberta farmer and rancher incomes just to have a fight with Mexico?

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, Alberta is excited to build our already strong relationship with the United States under a Trump presidency with the Republicans. Right now our bilateral trade relationship is around \$160 billion. We also have a trade relationship with Mexico; it's around \$3 billion per year and important. But, first and foremost, we will be a good partner to our strongest partner, the United States, and we will work with Canada to ensure that Alberta's priorities are reflected in any renegotiated agreement and that Alberta's jurisdiction is respected.

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

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm glad to hear that the government thinks the U.S. trade partner is more important than Mexico.

Given that Mexico is Alberta's second-largest agrifood exporter and trade is growing – for example, in 2023 Canadians' beef market share in Mexico increased to 14.2 per cent, a 12 per cent increase from 2022 – and given that before the Premier's comment it was clear that expanding trade with Mexico was a priority, with the agriculture minister heading to Mexico on a trade mission, to the Premier: did the Premier not know she was going to undermine his efforts to grow our trade with Mexico, or are you just not talking . . .

The Speaker: I might just remind the hon. member that questions after number 4 are to be done without a preamble.

The hon. the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can assure Albertans we will not be sending that member to negotiate renegotiations with the United States. The United States is Alberta's and Canada's number one trading partner, and we will approach it as such. They are good partners. We're looking forward to building this relationship, and we're also looking forward to building a relationship with Mexico, provided that their interests are aligned with Canada's and the United States'. It must be a Canada-first agreement that builds North America and not other jurisdictions, which may be adversarial at times.

Ms Sweet: Well, given that the Premier's call to pull Mexico out of the North American trade agreement clearly aligns with the new President-elect in the United States and given that under the previous Trump administration dairy, canola, and other agriculture producers were targeted at U.S. tariffs and given that Alberta agriculture producers have already raised concerns about the proposed 10 per cent tariff scheme, which will include canola and other crops, to the Premier: are you going to stand with Alberta agriculture producers, or are you going to stand with Trump?

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

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We do stand with our canola producers, who are in the middle of a trade battle. I was just in the UAE promoting Alberta's canola exports, and we will continue to go around the world, including to the Philippines, Indonesia, and other places to expand our trade options, but the United States and Canada must be aligned. It is in the interest of energy security, food security, and national security, and we will not compromise our number one trade relationship.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

COP 29 Climate Change Conference

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The United Nations Conference of the Parties, or COP 29, is a yearly meeting of diplomats, government officials, and companies from around the world to discuss issues like energy security and responsible energy production. But some, like Canada's environment minister, Steven Guilbeault, seem to use it as a platform to advocate for the dangerous phase-out of fossil fuels. With the minister of environment recently attending COP 29 last week, can the minister please explain the importance of Alberta's participation in COP 29? What was our message to the world?

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. We attended COP 29 to ensure

Alberta's real story is told. This is a story based on facts, not Ottawa's version of it. Alberta is the most responsible energy producer in the world. Emissions are declining as we meet global demands and power the world moving forward. Under our Premier we will not take a back seat when Ottawa takes steps that are disastrous for the people of our province. We are showing the world that it is possible to do the right thing for the environment while growing the economy, creating jobs, and ensuring safe, affordable, reliable energy.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and through you to the minister for the answer. Given that COP 29 has historically been used as a global mouthpiece for eco activists and Green Goblin politicians like Steven Guilbeault to push antienergy agendas and further given that Alberta is already home to some of the most ethically produced energy on the planet, can the minister please outline how Alberta leads the way with emissions reductions without harmful federal energy production caps and costly – so costly – carbon taxes?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Absolutely. Part of our message was to advocate for reasonable, rational, realistic conversations about energy production, meeting global demand, and, of course, reducing emissions. We are doing all of these things. Emissions are in decline even as energy production and our economy continue to grow, something that did not happen under the NDP. As global energy demand continues to rise despite Liberal-NDP disinformation on the subject and policies that punish people and our economy, we will continue to stand up for Albertans and Canadians.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and through you to the minister again. Given that energy demand continues to rise around the world while Liberals and NDP keep their heads in the sand and further given that Alberta must continue to stand up for our province and our natural resources as the world comes to us for solutions in spite of a shut-it-all-down approach from Ottawa, can the same minister explain to Alberta: is this answering a global call to be that responsible energy producer of choice?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Absolutely. We will continue to tell Alberta's story around the world. No government in our history has invested more into new technologies, obviously funded by industry, that reduce emissions and keep energy secure, reliable, and affordable for the people that we serve. We're seeing results, and despite the NDP-Liberal policies we in Alberta are drawing the world's most ambitious projects, from a massive Dow petrochemical product to Air Products' hydrogen plant and Heidelberg's world-class cement plant. All of this is taking shape right here in Alberta. We will continue to defend our province, our people, and all of our major industries.

Economic Development and Job Creation

Ms Goehring: Mr. Speaker, according to the Business Council of Alberta our economy is weakening. Albertans know this, with 39 per cent reporting that they felt the economy is getting worse. Our unemployment rate is the highest outside of the Maritimes. Despite

this news, this out-of-touch UCP government keeps bragging while Albertans fear what this news means for the job market or their personal finances. Can the minister of jobs explain why, rather than working to address the real concerns expressed by Albertans about affordability and unemployment, his government is celebrating an economy that is slowing down on his watch?

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

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's good to be back. A big thank you to the Minister of Infrastructure for stewarding the economy in my absence. I'm pleased to report that under his care 13,000 jobs were created in October alone, the majority of those full-time. He may be in the wrong ministry. He already outperformed four years of the NDP government in just one month.

Ms Goehring: Given that under the UCP job creation has dropped and given that the Business Council of Alberta reports that consumer confidence is also falling less with consumer spending, given that due to this government's choice to prioritize skybox tickets over supporting struggling Alberta families, people are rightly concerned about what the future will bring, will the minister confirm that neither he nor any other member of cabinet will accept more luxury gifts or tickets while Alberta's economy is struggling?

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, I'm perplexed. What is the opposition concerned about? Is it that Alberta is the highest productivity province? Is it because we're the highest weekly earnings province? Is it because we've added 80,000 jobs over the last 12 months? Forty per cent of the private job creation across Canada in the last 12 months has occurred right here in Alberta. Is it the record \$11 billion investment, one of the largest in 15 years, that we've just won with the Dow Chemical plant? Which is it? What is it that the NDP is concerned about? Is it perhaps that Albertans chose this party to manage the economy over their failed policies?

Ms Goehring: Given that this government broke their main promise about reducing taxes, leaving many Albertans caught off guard and struggling more under this UCP affordability crisis, given that after taking over \$650 million from Albertans with their bracket creep tax hike and given that they're trying to bring that back, given that the UCP have failed to support Albertans but did work to ensure that the tickets the Premier and cabinet can accept are protected from inflation, can the minister explain why they did not strengthen the economy or make it more affordable? Instead, they slowed the economy down and made it easier . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade.

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, what I can explain is why under the previous NDP government over 13 consecutive quarters people chose to leave Alberta. They saw more opportunity elsewhere. The NDP said: "Go get a job in B.C. It's embarrassing to be here. Let's shut down our primary industry at a time when the world needs energy security." What did we do? We reduced taxes, we reduced regulatory burden, and we championed business and our oil and gas sector. What's the result? Two hundred thousand new Canadians and immigrants coming to Alberta over the last 12 months because this is the place to be in Canada.

Accessibility Legislation

Ms Renaud: Alberta will soon be home to 5 million people; 1.3 million of those live with a disability. Other than Prince Edward Island, Alberta is the last province to get accessibility legislation.

What that means, Mr. Speaker, is that we do not have a framework that allows us to track progress of the identification, removal, and prevention of barriers for people with disabilities. We've repeatedly asked this UCP government: when will we see accessibility legislation? We get lots of word salads. It's a very simple question. When will this government table accessibility legislation for 1.3 million Albertans?

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

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We care very much about people with disabilities. We just signed on to the Canadian protocol. I know the minister of social services has been the main person there that has done a report, and we're looking at that report now. We have several pieces of accessibility legislation, not in one place but across government legislation, and we will consider, when we look at that report, what our next steps, if any, will be. I can tell you that we are constantly interested in making sure the lives of people with disabilities are good in Alberta.

Ms Renaud: Given that without accessibility legislation we don't have a framework that requires all ministries to report on the progress of identifying, removing, and preventing barriers for Albertans living with disabilities, given that we can't address significant issues like the unemployment of disabled Albertans without knowing what investments are made and given that we know investment in accessible apprentice seats, job training, accessible transportation, and the built environment are key to improving employment stats for disabled Albertans, when – when – will we see accessibility legislation?

Mr. Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member should take yes for an answer. As has already been said by the Minister of Municipal Affairs, Municipal Affairs has taken a lead on this with the work that they've been doing with their accessibility guidelines as well as the work that the disability advocate has done in my department as he works with the Minister of Municipal Affairs on this important issue. When it comes to employment, this government continues to invest millions and millions of dollars in both disability employment for those who are facing disabilities to be able to access work as well as investing with employers to be able to create safe places for individuals with disabilities to be able to work because we understand how important that is.

Ms Renaud: Given that a study published in 2022 estimated the benefit to Canadian society of full accessibility and inclusion of persons with disabilities to be \$337 billion, given that the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is twice that of their nondisabled peers and given that the most cited grounds for discrimination reported by the Alberta Human Rights Commission is disability, at 49 per cent, it is clear accessibility legislation is overdue. I would happily take yes as an answer if it was: yes, we're tabling accessibility legislation. The question is: when will you table accessibility legislation?

2:20

Mr. Nixon: Again, Mr. Speaker, this government is focused on actual actions that are helping individuals, not coming to the Chamber and continuing to ask for random legislation without any other context, which is why we have the disability advocate working with our partners in Municipal Affairs when it comes to things like zoning and bylaw issues and actual building code issues that matter for accessibility. As well, we continue to invest unprecedented amounts in both employment and with employers to be able to make sure that they can create job opportunities for those

who face disabilities, and we continue to have the highest disability support rates anywhere in the country.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon is next.

Enoch Cree Nation Surgical Facility

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last fall I participated in the groundbreaking ceremony of a new, state-of-the-art surgical facility in Enoch Cree Nation. This will be one of the first such surgical facilities in Canada to be built on First Nations land. This partnership between Alberta Health Services and Enoch Cree Nation is an example of our government's reconciliation being put into action. To the Minister of Health: could you share a progress update on this much-needed surgical facility?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. This is indeed really exciting news. The new surgical facility in Enoch Cree Nation will provide essential services and help us alleviate some of the surgical wait times that we have in Alberta. I'm excited to share that the surgical facility is currently under construction and is expected to be complete before the end of 2025. I'm delighted for the partnership with Enoch Cree Nation and the increased surgical capacity that this new facility will bring to our province and for all Albertans. It's just wonderful to be able to work with them. They've been great health partners, and we're looking forward to the completion.

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

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and through you to the minister. Given that orthopaedic wait times are one of the major issues my constituents want our government to address and given that this will be a facility specializing in providing orthopaedic operations efficiently, can the Minister of Health explain to this House how this facility, when completed, will reduce wait times and get more Albertans the surgery they need when they need it?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and again to the member. Once the new surgical facility is in service, it will effectively provide more than 3,000 orthopaedic surgeries annually, including more than 1,000 hip, knee, and shoulder replacement surgeries. Our government is working to significantly increase surgeries at underutilized hospitals, particularly in rural areas, and at chartered surgical facilities contracted with Alberta Health Services to provide publicly funded surgeries. Through these initiatives and with the grand opening of this new facility, Albertans can have greater access to care that they need much, much sooner.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and through you to the minister. Given that timely access to surgeries improves outcomes and reduces strain on our health care system and given our government's commitment to addressing these backlogs with required steps beyond the construction of this new facility, could the Minister of Health tell this House what other initiatives are under way to address health care wait times in our province?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What we can say is that through Budget 2024 we're investing \$305 million in the

Alberta surgical initiative to support 310,000 surgeries in the '24-25 fiscal year. That's more than we've ever done even prepandemic. Additionally, we've got \$313 million over three years which will go towards renovating and adding operating rooms in areas and centres across the province. Again, we've also added over 6,000 orthopaedic surgeries annually in our chartered surgical facilities both in Calgary and Edmonton, and we've got so much more that we are going to be happy to announce soon.

Protection of Species at Risk

Dr. Elmeligi: Mountain goat, cougar, grizzly bear, wolverine, fisher, lynx, and river otter: sounds like a list of iconic wildlife that Albertans love, but it's actually a list of animals featured in the 2024 hunting regulations with increased tag limits or even no limits. Sustainable hunting regulations are based on data that defines how many individuals can be removed from a population without impacting it, but the aforementioned hunting increases actually go against the current science. If the Minister of Forestry and Parks isn't listening to science or experts to inform wildlife management and hunting limits, who is he listening to?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Forestry and Parks.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thanks for the question. Of course, we have many professionals within the government, biologists that have great educations, that are specialized in making these decisions and coming up with this data that we base our decisions on moving forward. So I think it's kind of amusing, I guess, that the hon. member would suggest that the people that we have working in government – the biologists, the educated people – are not doing their job. Again, we're doing the management that needs to be done in this province, and we're doing it in a responsible way.

Dr. Elmeligi: Well, given that the new Alberta nature strategy is meant to recognize and communicate the importance of biodiversity and respond to a global biodiversity crisis, given that this inherently entails recovering species at risk like wolverines, fishers, and grizzly bears, given that reducing human-caused mortality is foundational to recovering any species at risk, given that the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas is charged with protecting species at risk, how can the minister sign off on increased hunting of these threatened species and protect biodiversity at the same time?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to speak to the great work that our department has been doing alongside the Department of Forestry and Parks to make sure that we get this right. It's why both our staff and the minister were there when we hosted our in-person engagement for the nature strategy. It was the first time many of those folks had said that they had all been in the same room together having these very important conversations. We'll continue to base our decisions on data, facts, and, of course, the recommendations of those who work in our department but alongside those in the communities that we are elected to serve.

Dr. Elmeligi: Well, given that Alberta's existing recovery plans for many species at risk are rarely funded, implemented, or monitored, given that the UCP's book on wildlife management has three chapters – one, got an issue with Alberta wildlife? Shoot it; two, want a species mounted on your wall? Do it; don't believe in science? Us neither – given that we have one minister waging a war

on wildlife and another minister too preoccupied with the war on the feds to actually protect the environment, given that Forestry and Parks isn't protecting species at risk and Environment and Protected Areas isn't either, who is?

Ms Schulz: Mr. Speaker, what that member is putting forward is completely absurd. Budget 2024 allocated \$6.4 million to support species-at-risk programs and activities. That includes critical funding to continue implementing recovery plans for native trout, woodland caribou, bats, peregrine falcons, and other species at risk; 34 and a half million dollars is allocated for caribou recovery as well in '24-25. Since 2019 we've seen \$15 million in funding and in-kind support to recover native trout, \$2.6 million in helping recover the greater sage grouse. We'll continue to work with Forestry and Parks on this.

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

Municipal Inspection of Medicine Hat

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Municipalities play an important role in shaping Alberta's communities and contributing to a stronger province. As a resident of Medicine Hat and as the MLA for the region I've been meeting with many constituents following the city's formal request for a municipal inspection. Residents are seeking clarity about next steps in this important process. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: could you provide an update on the status of Medicine Hat's request for a municipal inspection and outline what our community can expect in this process?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member for the best question I've had so far this session. The city of Medicine Hat did write to me in mid-September to formally request an inspection, and I have agreed to their request. As with municipal inspections, all of them, we are contracting an independent and credible municipal governance expert to conduct the inspection. I'm hopeful that the inspector's report will be available to the city and its residents by either late spring or early summer of 2025.

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

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and to the minister: you're welcome. Given that Medicine Hat residents, through their city council, have taken significant steps to requesting a municipal inspection and further given that municipal governance maintains public confidence and community cohesion during a very crucial time, can the minister share what specific resources and supports are available for our community to rebuild trust and maintain effective municipal governance through this process?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs has the call.
2:30

Mr. McIver: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The member is right. Confidence is an important aspect of our democratic process, and on this side of the House we are committed to strengthening public trust in municipalities. I've heard the concerns raised by the mayor and council. I've also heard the concerns raised by several citizens that have written to my office with genuine interest. Again, I expect the final report will help us get to the bottom of the inspections, and if there are any recommendations that become needed as a result of the report, we'll bring them forward, and I look forward to that day.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister. Given that Medicine Hat residents are eager to see this matter addressed in a transparent and effective manner and further given that there should be due diligence taken to ensure all matters are carefully considered pertaining to the mayor, council, and administration, can the minister please inform the House about the typical timeline for reviewing and conducting municipal inspections and when our community can expect to receive updates about the status of our request?

Mr. McIver: Well, again, the member is still correct. It is critically important that there's due diligence in the inspection. The timeline is not exact because we have an independent party doing it, but, again, we hope late spring, early summer we'll have something to say. Like all municipal inspections, Mr. Speaker, the report will be made available to the public. Albertans expect their local governments to be transparent and accountable. The inspection we are conducting in Medicine Hat is just one example of many of how we're doing that, and we certainly hope that it will be helpful for the future governance of Medicine Hat.

Consultations on Renewable Energy Development

Member Boparai: Mr. Speaker, when this government imposed its job-killing renewables ban, they claimed it was because RMA had demanded it; that wasn't true. They claimed that the utilities regulator demanded it; that also was not true. In fact, this government actually pressured the regulator into supporting this ban. Now this government is fighting to hide the results for the survey they did on renewable energy. Albertans have a right to see the results, to see the data. Why is the minister trying to hide it from them?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, the opposition has got all of these facts wrong. We are working on the best information that we have, working with all of our stakeholders, working with our regulators to make sure that we have a balanced approach, an agricultural-first approach to make sure that we use our land most appropriately, to make sure we keep future food prices down and affordable, and to make sure that we have reliable, dependable electricity that's affordable no matter where you live, work, or whatever you're using it for. We're working here on behalf of Albertans, and we're doing the job that the NDP failed to do.

Member Boparai: Given that this government has a long track record of hiding data from Albertans, like the results of the pension survey they refuse to release, and given that this government is refusing to actually reveal what Albertans have been telling them and given that there have been thousands of jobs lost and billions in investment chased away because of this ban, given that the UCP could for once be upfront with Albertans by releasing this data and actually listen to Albertans, will the minister do so, and if not, then why not?

Mr. Neudorf: Mr. Speaker, we actually have approved more renewables projects this year than we did last year or the year before that. What's the difference? We're doing it in a responsible way that takes an agricultural-first approach, making sure that we incorporate it with all the uses of the land. We are providing reliable, affordable electricity for Albertans no matter where they live. We're doing so in a transparent and open way. We have shared all the data that we have with all Albertans. We will continue to do so as we reform the system, handling and fixing the problems left behind by the NDP.

Member Boparai: Mr. Speaker, given that the government repeatedly claims to prioritize consultation with stakeholders but given that it is clear that this government is hiding a survey that likely shows Albertans do not support the Premier's desire to chase away renewable energy jobs and investment and given that the minister shouldn't get to pick and choose what information Albertans get to see, especially on a decision that could cost Albertans billions, will the minister just agree that Albertans deserve an open and honest government, stop the games, and release the data?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We do have an open and honest government, which is why we're sharing that information with all Albertans. We make sure that they know what they need to know to be able to make the best decisions. We are working to make our system better, more reliable. We are fixing the messes left behind by the NDP. We are restructuring our electricity market; we are renewing our transmission policy. We are here working hard to fix all the problems in our electricity system left behind by the NDP, and we as taxpayers are still paying \$100 million a year because of the mess that they made with this file. We won't be taking any advice from them.

Cancer Care Wait Times

Dr. Metz: Mr. Speaker, given that cancer wait times are so long that patients are dying before their first consult and that Alberta has a deficit of 83 oncologists and cannot keep up with workforce losses, it is shocking that the minister has not considered alternative strategies to provide care. Team-based care allows health professionals to work to their full scope of practice and allows more patients to be seen. Why has the minister not funded AHS to build the teams that support oncologists? These teams allow oncologists to manage more patients. Spend the money on teams to provide critically needed . . .

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would say that we are aggressively pursuing a solution to make sure that every person who is diagnosed with cancer has their surgeries or treatments within clinically approved time frames. In fact, between September 1, 2023, and August 31, 2024, AHS successfully hired 10.9 full-time oncologists and 5.1 hospitalists to do just what you were talking about: work together to solve real issues in cancer care.

Dr. Metz: Given that there is already a province-wide shortage of radiation therapists and the deficit is growing, Alberta needs to immediately fund more training spots and focus on retention. Given that the deficit is most severe in rural areas and that budget cuts to advanced education have reduced the opportunity to train technologists in centres such as Fort McMurray that serve large rural populations and given that where you train is where you stay, will the minister provide the funding needed for clinical educators and outreach to educators?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Advanced Education has risen.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have had extensive conversations with Fort McMurray and other rural centres across the province about funding additional seats for X-ray technicians and other professions as well. That work is ongoing, and we know that there are labour shortages in many different professions. We rely on the Alberta occupational outlook report as well as conversations with

our stakeholders. Again, this work is ongoing. Budget 2025 is around the corner, and we are going to make sure that we tackle these labour shortages.

Dr. Metz: Given that advanced-practice radiotherapists can take on many of the roles now performed by radiation oncologists and given that there is support for this shift in responsibility from radiation oncologists, why is the plan to move in this direction not in place in Alberta? Will the minister fund the education programs, the radiotherapy positions, and make the changes to the required scope of practice to make this a reality so more patients will get care?

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, we spend a lot of time talking to the faculties of medicine both at U of A and U of C to understand where the needs are and where we need to invest. So when we talk about additional seats in meeting that labour market demand, it is based on data from them and based on data from our other stakeholders. Again, we will continue this dialogue. We will continue to talk to the Minister of Health to make sure that those gaps are met.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed has a question to ask.

Support for Small Business

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On October 30 Justice Feasby of the Court of King's bench certified the class action against the province of Alberta on behalf of businesses affected by the public health orders that were deemed illegal by the court in last year's Ingram decision. To the Minister of Justice: will the province recognize the harms caused by the public health orders and provide redress for the small businesses that were harmed by those orders?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for his zealous advocacy for civil liberties in this province. I can tell you that the Ingram decision showed us that it was clear that Alberta needed to make changes, and that's exactly what we did as government. We made changes to the Public Health Act, and we recognize that accountability and transparency were necessary. That's exactly why we changed the Public Health Act such that elected officials, government make decisions and not bureaucrats in this province.

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

2:40

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for his answer. Given that many small businesses in Alberta are restaurants and that a report from Restaurants Canada earlier this year found that 62 per cent of these businesses are currently losing money or barely breaking even, up 9 per cent from the previous year, and further given that restaurant bankruptcies increased by 44 per cent last year, can the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade please explain how this critical industry is being supported by the government of Alberta?

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

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The restaurant industry plays a vital role in Alberta's economy by providing thousands of jobs and driving local economic growth. We understand the challenges that restaurants have been facing, especially in light of record inflation and interest rate increases as exacerbated by poor federal

policy. Since August 2023 Alberta restaurant sales have increased by 5 per cent, reaching \$1 billion. This shows strong demand and signs of recovery for the industry. However, we know more is needed to support them. By leading the country in job growth, weekly earnings, population growth, and by keeping taxes low with no sales tax, we are creating the conditions for restaurants and their customers, Albertans, to succeed.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister. Given that small businesses are the backbone of Alberta's economy and given that over 160,000 operate in our province alone, accounting for 95 per cent of all businesses and employing over half a million Albertans, can the same minister please elaborate on some of the ways that this United Conservative government will continue to ensure that Alberta remains the best place in the world to live, work, and start a business?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member is correct. Small businesses are the backbone of our economy, employing nearly 35 per cent of our private-sector workforce. Alberta's government has established itself as the most business-friendly jurisdiction with some of the lowest taxes, both corporate and small business, in North America. Additionally, Albertans benefit from no provincial sales tax, no payroll tax, creating an environment where entrepreneurs can thrive. We also offer practical supports like Biz Connect, Business Link, and Futurpreneur. Through these programs we are empowering Alberta's small businesses to grow and succeed, and we have a parliamentary secretary of small business, the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, who is consulting on how we can support them further.

Speaker's Ruling Use of Electronic Devices in the Chamber

The Speaker: Hon. members, I beg for your attention prior to concluding Oral Question Period today. I know that all members have read the memo that is sent from the Speaker prior to each session, but perhaps today would be a good opportunity to remind members of page 9, section 21, under Electronic Devices in the Chamber:

- Except as listed below, the use of a member's computer/tablet (e.g., laptop, Surface, iPad, [et cetera]) or a member's smart phone (data only) is permitted in the Chamber any time during the morning, afternoon, or evening sittings except: during Oral Question Period . . . on ceremonial occasions (. . . [throne speech], budget . . . Royal Assent) and when the Lieutenant Governor is in the Assembly.

Hon. members, I know no one would want to be disrespectful to this storied Chamber and everyone always wants to follow the rules except I did notice at least eight to 10 of you not doing that today. I encourage you to follow the rules of the Chamber, and I hope to not have to point any one individual out.

Hon. members, this concludes the time allotted for Oral Question Period. In 30 seconds or less we will continue with the remainder of the daily Routine.

Members' Statements (continued)

Cost of Living

Mr. Long: Mr. Speaker, it's such an honour to be able to rise and speak in this Assembly, but some of the conversations that happen

in here sometimes make me shake my head. In particular, lately I find it difficult to understand how the NDP can feign concern about affordability for Albertans. You see, while the NDP tries to hide from it, the fact is that it was their government's disastrous policies as they tried to win the favour of Justin Trudeau that drove up the cost of everything. Some would argue that Trudeau and the NDP alike are simply inept. Others would suggest that their governance is actually calculated, intended to rake in revenue off the backs of taxpayers, making life so unaffordable they will render their lives to the control of government. I will admit, Mr. Speaker, that when I first heard the suggestion, I defended the NDP and even the Prime Minister, telling folks that they simply didn't have a clue what they were doing. But after much consideration, I'm not sure anyone could possibly be that incapable.

Mr. Speaker, when the NDP were in government, they made our power grid and electricity prices as volatile as the weather. They tore apart the most affordable and reliable electricity system in North America and made it the most expensive. They also created a carbon tax, a tax that would increase the price of every single thing that we eat, drink, see, hear, and feel, literally everything we need. The NDP made life harder for everyone, especially for low- and middle-income Albertans and the businesses that they rely on to put food on their tables.

Mr. Speaker, NDP-Trudeau policies have led to Albertans not only having to tighten their belts a little bit but have legitimately created a lot of hardship for Alberta's youth, seniors, and families. The reality is that we all need to eat and we all need heat and electricity to survive, so there is no way to avoid the cost escalation they created. Couple these policies with their blatant attack on the energy sector, Alberta's and Canada's highest GDP contributor, and Liberal-NDP spending that skyrocketed debt for a province and nation are hurtling us on a trajectory towards bankruptcy.

Perhaps voters are right. The NDP and Trudeau aren't as clueless as they appear but, rather, were setting us up on a path of modern-day communist dictatorship.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Acadia has a statement.

RSV Vaccine Availability

Member Batten: Thank you. We first met in 2018. You were my hot tamale, always stirring up trouble and keeping me on my toes. We parted ways knowing that you would continue to thrive and grow under the care of my colleagues and, of course, your amazing family.

Years flew by, and we connected once more. This time we unknowingly posed for a picture at camp next to each other. This picture was then shared and came to the notice of your mom. What an absolute joy to reconnect once more, to see my page in your NICU journal diligently scripted by your mom, a picture of me holding you close while you stare at the ceiling and breathe through your nasal prongs. Then, just last week, how delightful it was running into your dad at a luncheon event. How cool is that?

But you know what is not cool? The state and the environment of our hospitals, the undervaluing and underresourcing of our health care professionals, and the reality that my hot tamale would not receive the same care now, in 2024, that they did in 2018. When it comes to health care, this UCP government has failed to build on what once was a world-renowned health care system. Instead, they create silos where there once was connection and have layered their friends into management positions while showing anyone who disagrees the door.

RSV creates significant burden of a disease, which most Canadian provinces recognize and have implemented free access for their vulnerable. Here in Alberta this vaccine is also provided for free to a select few: not all seniors, not all newborns, and not all infants.

The science continues to gift us more effective treatments to keep our newborns safe from RSV, but it's not available in Alberta. Per the Alberta government the manufacturer is to blame. It sounds weirdly similar to the government forgetting to order a flu vaccine earlier this year. It's almost as if this government does not understand how airborne illnesses work, and that's really shameful.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

Mr. Getson: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure as the chair of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices to table the following reports from the office of the Auditor General: one, Audit of the 2023-2024 Consolidated Financial Statements of the Province of Alberta: Annual Summary of Ministry Audit Work; two, Highway Maintenance Contracts; three, Processes to Assess and Manage the Condition of Affordable Housing; four, Travel, Meal and Hospitality Expenses of the Premier, Ministers, and Their Staff; five, An Analysis of Annual Performance Reporting by School Authorities; six, Reporting Performance Results to Albertans: Assessment of Implementation Report; seven, Victims of Crime and Public Safety Fund – Systems to Manage Sustainability and Assess Results: Assessment of Implementation Report. All the copies are in order, Mr. Speaker.

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

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of a letter from Dr. Cameron Barr, an inner-city physician who's calling on the minister to address the lack of supportive and affordable housing and to increase AISH and income support. I would urge all members of the House to read this letter.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs, followed by Calgary-Edgemont.

Mr. McIver: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I've got five copies of a social media post from CNIB on a discussion we had about Bill 20, thanking me for my interest and commitment to work with them.

2:50

Ms Hayter: I rise to table two letters from constituents. I have five copies from Dalhousie, Lisa Turner, who expresses her deep concern regarding the proposed antitrans legislation. She values equality and human rights and access to gender-affirming health care to protect from discrimination and improve mental health. Please create a supportive environment where individuals can thrive and strengthen the basic . . .

The Speaker: I might just remind the member that the purpose of tabling it is so that all members . . .

Ms Hayter: It's a very long letter.

The Speaker: I believe you. It could be super long. I think you have some good examples. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood is an expert tabler.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Edgemont for the second tabling.

Ms Hayter: From Kristine Bauer, just sharing that her child has left the province this year, partly because of her fear of the trans policies that will restrict their rights. She doesn't feel welcomed. She feels threatened. How are we going to recruit top talent in the future?

The Speaker: If I can help, the third sentence was probably the conclusion of the tabling. I encourage you to govern yourself accordingly.

The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the five requisite copies of an article from the *Calgary Herald*: Violent Criminals with Illegal Guns Are the Problem. Please enjoy the read.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by Edmonton-McClung.

Ms Renaud: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings, two letters, one from Barb Dupuis, one from Erin Pickard, both urging me to oppose the three antitrans pieces of legislation and to stand up for constituents.

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

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today with the requisite five copies to table of an article appearing in today's *Edmonton Journal* titled Not Securing Loads on Back of Vehicles Can Be Deadly, something which should be self-evident to all Albertans, but it seems to bear being repeated following a woman's death after a chair fell from a moving truck.

The Speaker: Are there other tablings? The Official Opposition Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings. The first is a letter provided to me by Richard, with his opposition to the antitrans policies. He provided numerous sources and resources.

The second tabling is from my constituent Valeeshia, again concerned about the antitrans legislation, a very short and sweet and to the point one, Mr. Speaker, about the doctor-family-patient relationship.

Finally, thirdly, Kelley, a constituent of mine, has written a letter in opposition to the antitrans pieces of legislation, stating that gender-affirming care saves lives.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the Assembly that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk: on behalf of hon. Mr. Nally, Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction, pursuant to the Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Act Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis commission 2023-24 annual report.

The Speaker: Hon. members, there were no points of order. That brings us to Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Written Questions

Nursing and Personal Services Provision

Q6. Dr. Metz asked on behalf of Ms Sigurdson that the following question be accepted.

How many operators were investigated during the period from January 1, 2023, to December 31, 2023, for failing to provide the minimum average hours of nursing and personal services required

under section 14 of the nursing homes operation regulation, Alta. reg. 258/1985?

[Debate adjourned November 4]

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others wishing to join in the debate for Written Question 6? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview has risen. The challenge for the hon. member is that the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity moved Written Question 6 on your behalf, which deems you to have spoken.

Are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie has risen.

Member Eremenko: I better get ready. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to rise and speak to Written Question 6 on the very important issue of continuing care.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

Now, the question in particular pertains to the number of minimum care hours that the continuing care regulations now contain. The initial legislation, before it was rescinded in April 2024, required 1.90 care hours per day per resident. That is just care hours, nurses, HCAs; it is not in addition to life enrichment services and some of the other kind of day-to-day services that are delivered to residents within a continuing care facility. It really does beg the question right off the top of why the government chose to remove any kind of minimum allocation when it came to the number of care hours. One would expect and one would certainly hope that there is a level of objectivity, a quantifiable objectivity, when it comes to the kind of care and service that is provided to our loved ones who live in these spaces.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

So 1.90 was what was in the original regulations. Those have now been removed. The minister has alluded to a recommended minimum of 3.62 hours. Again, why that isn't actually included in the regulations is a bit concerning for me, Madam Speaker, particularly because that needs to be a quantifiable, explicit, identifiable regulation that we can all point to as loved ones on behalf of our residents, to say: is this minimum standard in fact being met? It's incredibly important that we have that number as a shared measurement across the entire system.

Now, let's speak a little bit to this new Continuing Care Act and to the continuing care regulations if we may. Before constit break on one of the other Mondays we had a bit of a back and forth between our side of the House and the other around exactly where people can find information related to accommodation standards and different inspections that are being completed across province. I want to reiterate and put that website into *Hansard* one more time for people who may not have been watching earlier. I think it's a really, really important one, and I struggled to find it. So I want to put it in the *Hansard* one more time: <https://standardsandlicensing.alberta.ca>.

The reason I repeat that, Madam Speaker, is because providing that information is in fact required of the government in the new regulations. In section 78 of the continuing care regulations there is a very fulsome description of the kind of information that Albertans can now expect to receive from this government around the operations of continuing care facilities across the province. It's incredibly important that people know where they can access that information. As I mentioned, it was not an easy one for me to find, so I want to put it in the record one more time for folks so that they can then better access that information.

Now, of course, a bit of a frustrating piece that perhaps the minister can take away and mention to the department is that when you use that web page, you can only search distinct facilities, and then you have to open them up one by one to see when the latest inspection was. Were there any decisions that were made that needed to be

rectified? Are they compliant? Are they noncompliant? What are some of the actions that are being taken?

What would be really terrific, I think, for all Albertans and certainly for both of us, on both sides of these Chambers, Madam Speaker, is to have a comprehensive list so that we could in fact have, you know, a more general kind of system-wide overview of what's actually happening. Then if we can identify themes, if we can identify some trends – are there some consistent inspection issues that are not being met? Well, then we can see that across the system this is something that actually needs to be addressed. But currently that capacity is not within the system. I would hope that perhaps that could be taken away and improved upon for further transparency and accountability.

Now, I am the shadow minister for Mental Health and Addiction, Madam Speaker. I think it is incredibly important to emphasize that continuing care is not just for seniors. It is for Albertans over the age of 18 who are facing impediments to independent living. It is not just palliative. It is not just end-of-life care. It is not just for seniors. It is 18 all the way up. It is incredibly important that with this new change to continuing care – I think language is important. We can all agree in these Chambers that language is incredibly important. The move away from long-term care to continuing care, I think, should demonstrate that it is an all-encompassing piece of regulation and standard and legislation. It is not just about seniors.

But as a result, I think that does speak to a kind of growing complexity or maybe an existing complexity, that we're now better equipped to understand and to standardize, that it's not just seniors or kind of geriatric care that needs to be provided in some of these spaces. It is complex mental health care. It is people with a whole range of disabilities, from mild to moderate to extreme, and all the way up to seniors, who, of course, have a whole range of needs in addition to, you know, both mental and physical and emotional and social needs. That growing complexity, I think, is incredibly important.

3:00

To go back to this Written Question 6 around continuing care hours: when we are asking how many facilities in the last year were not meeting that 1.90 hours per day of care hours, why not? What was jeopardized by those organizations when they weren't able to provide the 1.90 hours? And is that one number truly reflective of the kind of complexity of facility and the kind of complexity of resident who's living in these facilities? What I would certainly hope for in that case is that – let's err on the side of caution. Let's bring up that number. Let's make it clear. Let's make it explicit and available to Albertans so that they know what they can expect for their loved ones in these facilities.

Now I want to talk a little bit about the complexity in continuing care, Madam Speaker. I've had the privilege of working with a number of family advocates, family council members from Carewest Colonel Belcher, who have expressed great concern around the co-location of complex mental health patients of all ages with seniors, particularly veteran seniors who themselves are oftentimes dealing with mental health issues around PTSD associated with their service. These incredibly hard-working servicemen and -women deserve some peace and some tranquility and some care and some adequate service in their final years and into their retirement.

Now, the initial response when this story broke in May of this year was that this had become a practice only during COVID to provide some relief to the system. But when I was at the conference for Alberta Continuing Care Association, I was informed that this has been happening for years, this co-locating of complex mental health patients with seniors, and people – operators, service providers, health care providers – particularly emphasized that residents with complex mental health issues commingled, in particular, with seniors who have dementia or Alzheimer's is not a good combination. It doesn't often

work out terribly well, and it ends up not serving anybody. I would say that it also doesn't end up serving the staff who are tasked to care for those residents to the very best of their abilities and to the full scope of their practice.

One operator at the continuing care conference shared a story of an 18-year-old girl with complex mental health issues being housed with, you know, 90-year-olds, lovely people, I'm sure, with dementia and mental health issues and Alzheimer's. But it was not creating the kind of environment for this person to thrive and to be successful given her condition and given her placement. That was not the right arrangement to provide. I just think, once more: if we are not being explicit about the minimum number of care hours, how are we actually ensuring, with that kind of complexity, that we're meeting the needs?

The Deputy Speaker: Are there are other members to join the debate? The hon. Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. I'm happy to get up and speak on this particular topic. The government of Alberta is committed to ensuring Albertans get the care and support they need in continuing care. The nursing homes general regulation is no longer in effect in Alberta as it has been replaced by the Continuing Care Act and its regulations, effective April 1, 2024.

I just wanted to share with the members opposite because they continue to say that it's not easy to find this information. I did a quick Google search and found the information that I needed, and I wanted to share with you. Under the continuing care mandatory reporting – and I keep hearing from members opposite that there isn't, you know, a way to access this information, that it's questionable as to whether people have to report issues. In fact, it's right here in black and white: continuing care operators, supportive living accommodation operators, and home and community care providers in Alberta must report specific events, incidences, and changes to the Alberta government.

There are two main reporting mechanisms, the duty to notify and the notice to the director. The requirements for both are established in the Continuing Care Act and regulations, and additional expectations are outlined in the provincial accommodation standards and the continuing care health service standards. It goes on to specify how you go about doing that. There are links on how to connect to those areas, there are discussion guides, submission forms, et cetera, and it just goes on and on as to how that can be done. All to say that there is a very clear mechanism for reporting issues and also for dealing with issues. Therefore, it was the reason we rejected the premise of the question, because the information is there.

The members opposite had four years to improve the Continuing Care Act and many of the other acts that previously existed. It's the reason we streamlined the whole system. They failed to do so. They could have modernized the legislation – it was decades old – but they didn't, and we chose to. The Continuing Care Act, as was said, did come into effect on April 1 of 2024, and it is updated and it's streamlined. It really replaces a number of old acts that needed to be updated. The new regulations balance the need for flexibility to meet a wide range of resident needs with clear requirements – and I say clear requirements – to ensure quality care and safety. As I've indicated and read from the website, there is a duty to report if that doesn't happen.

The new regulations no longer formally state the minimum number of hours of care in continuing care homes, but continuing care home operators in Alberta are funded to provide an average of 3.62 worked hours per day per resident. This is significantly higher than the 1.9 hours previously mandated in the nursing homes operations regulation. Now

contracts and funding agreements with continuing care home operators in Alberta specify the staffing mix, and the hours of care must be based on the needs of the residents at that site. So it is, again, very site specific. For example, the differences between continuing care homes, including the physical size, the number of residents, and residents' care needs, result in differences in the numbers of clinical staff needed to care for those residents and the hours of care that each resident and home need to ensure quality care. Again, we are indicating that every resident is entitled to 3.62 worked care hours per resident per day, much more than the 1.9 hours previously indicated.

If the care needs of a resident living in a continuing care home are higher than average, then the operator is funded for more than the average care hours. The 3.62 is the average, and we actually fund for more than that if it's actually necessary for those individuals. Contracts are regularly monitored, care hours are regularly audited to ensure that operators are delivering the care needed by those residents, so we do have that accountability measure in place. Accountability is paramount, and it will always be paramount.

This approach to not include minimum staffing hour requirements in legislation actually aligns, Madam Speaker, to British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Yes; other provinces are doing exactly what we're doing, making sure that we have the flexibility in the system to deal with the issues but, again, making sure that we are funding for the appropriate level of care for those individuals. Ontario is the only Canadian jurisdiction that mandates minimum hours of care for long-term care in legislation. Unlike Ontario but like every other province there, we are following very good guidelines in terms of making sure that we are providing care for individuals in this province.

Budgets 2023 and 2024 included funding to incrementally increase direct hours of care in continuing care homes in response to recommendations from the 2021 facility-based continuing care review and to reflect the increases in resident needs. Madam Speaker, you'll remember that our government was engaged in extensive – and I mean extensive – information gathering from continuing care providers and everyone involved in the continuing care world, and that resulted in what ended up being a very good report that led to the Continuing Care Act and the reforms that we've put in place.

3:10

In addition to the regulations that maintain minimum staff presence and role requirements that apply in continuing care home settings, there are other requirements, both current and after the new act is in effect, that ensure operator accountability, quality care, and safety. As I said earlier, I read right from the website as to how there is a duty to report if there are any issues. This includes Alberta Health audits for compliance in continuing care health facility standards, mandatory accreditation with an accrediting body such as the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities and Accreditation Canada. So, again, we've got audits in place. They have to comply to the continuing health service standards, mandatory accreditation with an accrediting body, et cetera; so lots of checks and balances in place.

We don't want to create red tape for these continuing care organizations, but we have to have that accountability to make sure that our loved ones – these are the people that have built this great province. These are, you know, our most vulnerable, our seniors, ones who have given so much to us. They're our parents. They're our grandparents. They are people who have dedicated their lives to making our lives that much better, and they deserve to be well looked after.

As the members opposite also have indicated, this also includes individuals with disabilities. As a former rehab practitioner that worked with individuals with disabilities, developmental disabilities, we have to make sure that they have the ability to go into very caring,

safe environments. That's what every parent wants for their child that has a disability that requires that level of care. We want to make sure that they are in a facility that is taking into account their needs and not putting them in a vulnerable position.

You know, through these mandatory audits we also have the ability to include the collection and monitoring of information on the hours of care provided at all continuing care homes as well as resident assessments and agreements with operators outlining contractual accountabilities, reporting requirements, and funding. It's the reason we're investing over a billion dollars over three years to transform our continuing care system. Our government wants to make sure that everyone, every senior and everyone with a disability, receives the care that they need in a safe and nurturing environment.

Madam Speaker, there is great need for us to ensure that our most vulnerable have the care that they require, and it is the reason why we're investing so heavily. It's the reason why we took on the very hard and difficult work of making sure that our continuing care legislation was updated, making sure that we're funding the proper level of care, that we went from 1.9 hours to 3.62 hours as a minimum. Of course, if there are more hours that are required, they will absolutely be given to those individuals. It is the reason why we want to make sure that our loved ones, regardless of what level of care they need, you know, whether they're in home care, whether they're – of course, we're always making sure that we provide what we can to our seniors and our loved ones. If we can keep them in their homes, I know many of them would like to stay in their home as long as possible. But when they can't stay in their home, we have to make sure that our continuing care facilities do provide excellent care.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to join the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I was listening to the minister quite carefully, and I heard everything but the answer to the question that a member has asked. For the benefit of the minister and everybody in this House I will read the question again. It's asking about:

How many operators were investigated during the period from January 1, 2023, to December 31, 2023, for failing to provide the minimum average hours of nursing and personal services required under section 14 of the nursing homes operation regulation?

That's the question the member has asked. That's what we are looking for in terms of answer. And I did look up the website that the minister referred to. Yes, it has a duty to notify. It has a duty to send notice to the director, all those things. But the question is not about that. The question is not even about what the state of affairs is right now.

The question is under a previous regulation that is now spent as of April 1, 2024. Section 14(5) of that regulation says, "An operator shall cause his nursing and personal services staff to provide an average of at least 1.90 paid hours of combined nursing and personal services per resident per resident day in his nursing home." At least 22 per cent of those hours, nursing and personal services combined, shall be provided by nursing staff under that regulation. That regulation I understand has now been spent as of April 1, 2024.

But the question is when that regulation was in place, there was a duty as well to provide 1.9 hours of care, combined nursing and personal. The question is about that. How many continuing care operators were investigated for failing to provide that care? That's just about basic accountability.

We do understand that continuing care facilities are an important part of our system of care. They do provide critical services to highly

complex Albertans, their unpredictable medical needs, and their continuing kind of health care needs within that facility. That's the reason that there were some regulations in place, there were some standards in place. We're not talking about what the new standards are. We are talking about: when those standards were in place, were there any operators that failed to meet those standards? That's a question about simple accountability.

Government is referring us to a website that talks about what should happen. It doesn't provide data. It doesn't tell me how many operators were investigated. It doesn't tell me how many times those operators failed to provide that care that they were required to by law and paid for by the public to provide to those in their care. That's the data we are looking for. The minister just glanced over a website that doesn't talk about those investigation data. She talked about what's in place now, how they have repealed that, what they have replaced it with, all those things. They may relate to continuing care, but none of that was about the question that was asked.

I know that the Member for Edmonton-Riverview has asked those questions during question period many times, and we didn't get the answer because the government refuses to be accountable. That's the reason the member has submitted that in writing, so that they can take their time, look into this, and provide us and Albertans with the information that was requested of them.

We do know and we hear from our constituents, as I said, that continuing care plays a very important role. But we do hear concerns about where those standards are not met. Albertans have a right to know when those standards are not met, what their government is doing to make sure that people who are receiving those services, who are in the care of those operators, are heard, their grievances are heard, that failure to meet that standard is investigated, and there is some action taken by the government to make sure that going forward those operators meet those standards and provide the needed and necessary care that they are paid for to those who are in their care.

3:20

This question is important because in the last few years in particular, under the UCP watch, we have seen a steady decline in the standard of care. Whether it's Alberta Health, any area of health care, whether it's senior care, whether it's mental health and addiction, whether it's cancer care, what we have seen under this government is that health care and the standard of health care is falling.

It's good to have some duty in the legislation, but if government is not serious about following through implementing that duty, that duty on paper doesn't mean anything. Take any example. The government will get up and they will come up with some random numbers: we have cut this much red tape, that has saved Albertans this many millions and this many billions. But what's happening there is that in the name of red tape reduction, in the name of finding efficiencies, government is cutting the standards that were in place, thus lowering the standard of care that Albertans were receiving prior to this UCP taking over. That has been the case throughout the government's services. Take any service, any program that this government has been providing. That's what they have been doing in the name of cutting red tape and finding efficiencies.

We do know that there were instances where continuing care operators failed to meet these standards. We do hear from Albertans throughout this province. Our shadow minister for Seniors has heard those concerns. Many of my colleagues have heard those concerns. That is the reason that we are asking so that we can see if the government has done anything to hold those operators accountable, if the government has used its power and responsibility to investigate those operators and make sure that Albertans in those continuing care facilities are getting the service that they need.

As taxpayers Albertans are paying for that service, so we have every right to ask how our money is being spent. If, when we pay for some service, Albertans are not getting that service, their government, a responsible government must step up and investigate why that's the case and put safeguards in place to make sure that whatever we contract for, we are getting the value and that people who send their loved ones to continuing care facilities are able to rely on government standards, are able to rely on assurances that certain standards will be met and they will receive the service that they are promised to receive. That's why this question is important.

With that, I will cede my time to other colleagues. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Other members to join the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Klein.

Member Tejada: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to again highlight what the question actually is, which is: how many operators were investigated during the period from January 2023 to December 2023 for failing to provide the minimum average hours of nursing and personal services required under section 14 of the nursing homes operation regulation? What I want to highlight here, too, is that we all know that the Alberta senior population is one of the fastest growing populations and that continuing care is critical and a critical component of how we care for our elders. We've heard a lot of talk from the other side about how much we cherish our elder population, how older Albertans have built this province. I also heard a lot of numbers about how we're funding more than ever. My question is: how much of that has to do with population growth if this is one of the fastest growing populations?

In the years that I've worked in constituency offices, in my time with a sister who actually worked in continuing care and witnessed first-hand just how lacking we were in the care that we provide to our seniors, and then in, also, the backdrop of COVID, I think that actually brought into stark relief just how many gaps we have and who pays the price for that. That's vulnerable seniors as the Member for Calgary-Currie mentioned earlier. It's also folks with other conditions that require continuing care.

When we're talking about not meeting minimum average hours of nursing, I just want to talk a little bit about what that means. We're talking about minimum hours of nursing, so minimum hours of care provided to each senior. In this case we're talking about minimum hours of care that are provided to them and what that actually means. It's about quality of life. It's about hygiene. It's about mental health and connection. In some cases it's about culturally appropriate care and some continuity in the care that seniors are receiving, familiarity that they have with their caregivers, which is so important at such a vulnerable stage in life and when a lot of us are facing an affordability crisis.

Families are busy, and the thing that I've been hearing from a lot of folks on the doors in the last week, constituency week, was that concern for how their family members, their cherished family members, are being cared for. One woman, who stands out for me, stood with me in the cold to tell me a very harrowing story of her mother who eventually passed and how her family members had to fill the gaps because she wasn't getting the care that she needed, how long her mother had to wait in a diaper to be seen. That's what not meeting minimum hours of care looks like to a family member and the physical realities and the toll that it takes on our seniors.

I have two very, very precious family members who are getting on in age, and when I think about the possibility of them going into continuing care, it's frightening to me to hear the stories that I heard from this constituent, who was in tears on her doorstep because of how much more her family had to do to take care of that parent, and that their needs still weren't met in terms of nutrition, in terms of

the social connection that she could get from staff members. A lot of those gaps had to actually be met by family members, who were already struggling to work and to be able to provide for their own families and for their elder.

When we're talking about this question about answering how many operators we're investigating, I think it's important to think about what the state is right now. What we had before was 1.9 hours as a minimum hours of care for families, and this provided some assurance that Albertans in continuing care weren't being neglected. In fact, experts and, I would say, even in a report that was actually commissioned by this government, the recommendation was actually to increase the hours to 4.1, which is the standard. Rather than listen to the evidence that this government itself commissioned, they actually got rid of that standard altogether. While I heard the member talking about funding and making sure that we're funding and then in the same breath talking about removing that requirement, what we're doing is removing accountability.

So we can fund until we're blue in the face, and we can react later when people haven't actually met the requirements. That is what this question is about: how many people failed to provide that minimum standard of care? When I think about COVID and how many family members I spoke to just even in that time – and I know that those were unprecedented times, talking to family members, who were absolutely devastated to see their family members and the physical state of their family members after not having received the care that they needed and at that time in some cases not being able to help because of the health emergency that we were in. Now, we've also seen, basically, a shift of the deck chairs from one ministry to another. That's caused a lot of chaos, and it's also provided a lot of cover for lack of accountability. Again, that seems to be the overall theme.

3:30

One of the things that happens when we don't have minimum hours of care and we have staff members that are run ragged, run off their feet: the staff turn over very quickly, and that's not their fault. Staff face moral injury when governments don't take accountability and don't provide not only those guidelines but the requirements of care. They're left short-handed and scrambling from patient to patient, and of course we're going to see the gaps in the service that those seniors receive.

What we're also facing is, we know, population growth such as we've never seen, and in terms of continuing care we know that the need will increase by 62 per cent by 2030. Are we prepared for that? Are we going to measure that? How are we going to measure that? One of those measures would be minimum hours of care, but of course we've removed that as a measure altogether and as an accountable measure.

We know that seniors are the largest growing demographic, and while I hear lots of talk about how much we want to care for our seniors, we also have seen a shift away from home care and barriers now that have been put up for folks to be able to do home care. It's something that is increasingly becoming an unaffordable option for most. The government closed applications without notice for home-care providers, and it's increasingly something that could be left only for the elite, so also decreasing the opportunity for folks to age in care.

Again, I would stress that, while I heard lots – I heard about 10 minutes of information with no answer to this question, and it's a pretty simple one. We know that the numbers are there, that they can quote them back to us, that they know how many providers failed to provide those minimum hours of care. Living in such a prosperous jurisdiction, to think that we won't take accountability on that, that we won't provide at least that minimum level of

assurance to families in how their families are being cared for is quite the question to ponder. But I think at least there is one question here, and that is a question that the minister can answer, and I look forward to hearing her give us that concrete answer and to take some accountability.

Thanks.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

Mr. Getson: Thanks, Madam Speaker. I rise to try to address the written question by the Member for Edmonton-Riverview. The member's question is regarding the continuing care homes and operation regulation. This legislation governs the operation and management of continuing care homes across the province, ensuring safety, well-being, and the quality in care for residents.

I think we've heard in here, Madam Speaker, that both sides of the aisle are in violent agreement when it comes to caring for our seniors and wanting to make sure that their best interest is taken care of. We heard the minister speak quite eloquently as well to this a little bit earlier, and for those at home I'll give you a clip on that one so you can catch her words, because they're a lot better than mine are.

Section 14 of the regulations referenced by the member opposite's question outlines the care requirements for operators in continuing care homes. The current mandates for that, Madam Speaker, are at least one nurse on duty at all times, a designated charge nurse for each shift, a minimum of two nursing and personal services staff members at any given time. So that's the current regulations without any changes.

The question at hand here has a few implications, and the member asks how many operators were investigated in 2023. It's with respect that I would submit that this question diverts focus from the substantive discussion in the Chamber. Answers are publicly available online and accessible to all. Information is readily available online at standardsandlicensing.alberta.ca. Again, standardsandlicensing.alberta.ca. Transparency remains a cornerstone of all of our commitments to Albertans here, Madam Speaker.

What we could be doing instead of potentially debating this question and maybe spending some time on some other items would be to shift away from the specific investigations or on specific items and maybe take that time to discuss proactive measures to improve care and quality in these facilities. What would some of those potential proactive items be? Well, how about enhancing resident care? How about ensuring facilities meet the highest standards? How about we foster some more accountability? How about we implement some best practices? How about in doing these things, the outcome is that we can better serve that vulnerable population?

Now, recent notable events by the minister here – the Minister of Health expanded the division in Alberta Health responsible for investigating these concerns and reinforcing our dedication, again, to our residents' well-being. Our government is committed to a high level of care, oversight, and accountability, Madam Speaker. Our government takes noncompliance very seriously. Alberta Health monitors all facilities with outstanding issues, escalates enforcement when necessary. Mental, emotional, and physical health are integral to the resident experience. They are prioritizing holistic care approaches to ensure positive, enjoyable experiences in those continuing care facilities.

For these reasons, the Continuing Care Act exists in Alberta. It was implemented April 1, 2024. It emphasizes quality of life, dignity, respect, and supporting caregivers and staff and enabling Albertans to age in place as couples.

Now, Madam Speaker, in the last sitting of the Assembly I was actually fortunate enough to work with at that time the minister of seniors and housing and affordability, and I co-chaired a task force for her. These were some of the mandates, some of the items, that that task force came up with, that council. I'm very pleased to see those recommendations, the things that we did and the feedback that we had to allow that. Again, that last item I'll re-emphasize again: enabling Albertans to age in place as couples. Nothing breaks a person's heart more than to see a cute little old couple, that have been working and living together and raising families only to be at the stage of life when they need the care most, get separated. This one really does a lot of good for the soul and keeps those little couples together for as long as we can, and they can help support each other.

Supporting care staff means improvements in care, beginning with addressing the staff challenges. Creating a supportive environment equips staff to provide the highest quality of care. Again, a lot of the initiatives that are taking place also are making sure that there's parity of esteem in the different vocations and finding folks, whether it's students or otherwise, a pathway to get into these very critical areas.

Some of the investments that have taken place in Budget 2024 include over a billion dollars over three years to transform the continuing care system. Some of those key initiatives are expanding community care, increasing workforce capacity, and enhancing quality and choice for residents. That's a big one, enhancing the quality and choice for residents, again, building out that envelope and making sure that there's a variety of things that folks have options for. Incremental funding will increase direct care hours, improving quality of care and reducing staff pressures.

In closing, our government is working towards providing the best health care in Alberta, prioritizing meaningful discussions centred towards change and innovation. Albertans deserve better, and our government is working towards what they rightly deserve. Again, it's been stated here a number of times, and I believe that the opposition and ourselves greatly agree that our seniors are absolutely paramount to us. They're our grandmas, our great-grandmas, grandfathers, community leaders, elders, et cetera, and the best thing we can do is to make sure that we focus our time on making sure that they get the care and the attention they need. Again, they've given up so much for us to be here and enjoy the life that we have.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

Ms Hayter: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I think it's appropriate, as we're sitting here talking about our nursing home operations and our seniors, that my staff actually has reached out about a Christmas event at one of my seniors' homes. That was probably one of the favourite things I've done in the last little while, go for Halloween and get to dance with some of the seniors and the students that came in. As I'm thinking about them right now and a few weeks ago, you know, just the facility and being in there, their faces right now are coming to mind.

I think we could all agree that it's all of our responsibility and the government's responsibility to care for our grandparents and care for our parents. I think of my own aging mother, who at some point might go into one of these facilities, and I hope that they're all well cared for, like any one of us would want our parents to be cared for. That's kind of why we need these standards of care in our care facilities, to ensure that our most vulnerable people, our family members and other vulnerable residents, are kept safe. I think it's our moral obligation to ensure that seniors and other vulnerable residents get the care that they need, and when we start to remove the minimum hours of care, it becomes dangerous.

3:40

You know, the Member for Edmonton-Riverview had asked, we're just asking to know if we could provide the minimum average hours of nursing and personal services required – how many were checked in on? How many were investigated? – so that we could ensure that our family members are safe, that Albertans are safe. With that minimum hour, it makes things unsafe for people, and we need the act for accountability. We need to have regulations on our care hours that are required by law so we don't have standards brought down. I don't want to reduce our care in order just to boost profits.

When we were reviewing the continuing care, I am curious as to why – you know, there was an opportunity there. We could have increased guaranteed minimum care hours up to four and a half hours a day. That's recommended by the government's own facility-based continuing care review. Instead of boosting it up to 4.5 hours a day, we're now looking at instead to maybe possibly put Albertans and seniors in danger by dropping our hours to the – it's recommended to 3.62, but that's not the actual standard. You know, we're looking at services for seniors going from 61 to 70 per cent then.

I'm concerned about this government's decision and not being accountable in holding operators in meeting care standards to be accountable. As the Member for Calgary-Klein had spoken about, you know, part of it is making sure that they're getting showered, that they're having somebody there just to care for them. As somebody who's been in one of those caring roles, it's important to have those hours just to meet needs, to help make sure they're having a well-kept meal, to make sure that they're able to have a bath so they don't smell. I feel bad for seniors when you have a visit with them and there's a bit of an odour, and it's just a matter of saying: okay; let's help them have a bath.

This decision is evidently going to start to make things worse in our private and in our for-profit facilities. Our demand is getting higher for beds, but also, you know, the demand for always getting profits is going up. I'd hate to see operators cutting corners, and that is why we're asking this question. We'd like to know how many are being investigated so that we know that our seniors are not being in a facility where they're cutting care corners.

I don't understand why the new rules prescribed for the hours of – sorry. Why don't the new rules prescribe how many hours of care residents should receive? To quote our Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, until now, if an Albertan wanted to be assured that their loved ones would get a minimum standard of care, it was in our law. She went on to say that now there is no guarantee. She then went on to say that it's not the same as putting those minimum standards into law. She said that the hours would be discretionary and subject to one-on-one discussions between the government and contracted caregivers. We've even had, like, the United Nurses of Alberta warn us with this change. They said, you know, in a report commissioned by the province three years ago, that it was recommended to jump the hours of care that each resident received.

You know, without this bump in hours as a guarantee, I think that the worry about operators being investigated has also gone up. We've talked about the compliance rates in Alberta's continuing care and supportive living facilities, and we shouldn't be relaxing our standards right now and giving more flexibility. These are our seniors. These are our mothers and our grandparents.

I'm concerned with the cleanliness. I am concerned even with hydration, that if we don't have that standard of care, we need to make sure that people are even just getting water. When we looked at the 2024 report and data, you know, it showed that there were 337 issues that hadn't been resolved, and I think that tells us that we need to be doing this, that we need to have compliance, because

that's 337 issues that some senior, one of our family members, was impacted by.

I think also about the staff that are doing the work and the extra weight that is being carried on them as they try to care for seniors in an underfunded operation. They're wanting to be there and just care, and the mental health that these employees, who are usually women or racialized people who are doing all this care work – they're not being supported to properly do it.

I don't know what's wrong with mandating a level of care in legislation for the people that we all care about and love. You know, we have an ability – like, if we do, if the government has that ability to go in and audit these individuals and look at the continuing care homes to make sure that the clients and the patients and the residents that are living there are getting the best quality of care, why are we not able to answer the question about how many operators are being investigated between January 1, 2023, and December 31, 2023? We don't have that minimum average of hours now. There has been past neglect and people going in, so I'm just wondering why we're unable to answer how many operators have been investigated during the time frame.

I would like to cede my time to my colleague.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any other members that would like to join in the debate on Written Question 6?

Seeing none, would the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview like to close?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I just want to thank all my colleagues on this side for, you know, all the comments you made and how much you've shared your own personal stories, what's happening in your constituencies, and what's going on in the continuing care system. Thank you so much. I really appreciate everyone's comments.

I just want to say that, in support of accepting this matter before the Assembly, I'd encourage all members to vote in support. We know that the minimum care hours are essential to ensure residents of continuing care receive the care they need. I mean, they're absolutely fundamental, as so many people have said, and of course the question covers the time period January 1, 2023, to December 31, 2023. That is before the legislation changed in April of 2024, so there will be some reporting even though it is only 1.9 hours daily and not nearly enough. But, of course, as people have already articulated, that was actually taken out of the legislation, so we do have no minimum daily hours now.

The minister assures us that in the private agreements that the government makes, that the UCP makes with providers, those specific care hours are there, but that's not a transparent process, so we don't know about it. I guess I just want to encourage the government that that still is very important in legislation.

Having said that, I think that this is a very important matter that all members of the House should accept, and I ask them to vote in favour of it. Thank you. I will adjourn debate.

[The voice vote indicated that Written Question 6 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:50 p.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Brar	Goehring	Renaud
Ceci	Haji	Sabir
Chapman	Hayter	Sigurdson, L.

Dach	Hoyle	Sweet
Eremenko	Kasawski	Tejada
Against the motion:		
Amery	Johnson	Sawhney
Armstrong-Homeniuk	Jones	Schow
Boitchenko	LaGrange	Schulz
Bouchard	Loewen	Sigurdson, R.J.
Cyr	Long	Sinclair
de Jonge	Lovely	Singh
Dreeshen	Lunty	Stephan
Dyck	McDougall	Turton
Fir	McIver	van Dijken
Getson	Nally	Wiebe
Glubish	Neudorf	Wilson
Guthrie	Nicolaides	Wright, J.
Horner	Nixon	Yao
Hunter	Petrovic	Yaseen
Jean	Rowswell	
Totals:	For – 15	Against – 44

[Written Question 6 lost]

Motions for Returns

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

Fees, Gifts, and Benefits

- M1. Ms Notley:
A return showing a list of every fee, gift, or other benefit that exceeds \$500 in value that was accepted by an employee of the Premier's office or an employee of the office of a minister in accordance with Order in Council 237/2023, including the exact value and description of each fee, gift, or other benefit that was accepted.

Nonprofit Grants

- M4. Ms Sweet:
A return showing a list of all grants, organized by year, provided by the government to the nonprofit corporation Results Driven Agriculture Research (RDAR) during the period from April 1, 2019, to March 31, 2024.

Highway De-icing

- M5. Mr. Dach:
A return showing copies of all documents prepared by the government relating to the effectiveness of salt brine solutions for de-icing provincial highways.

Community Airport Program Funding

- M8. Mr. Dach:
A return showing a list of all community airport program funding recipients for each year during the period from May 1, 2019, to March 31, 2024, and, in respect of each recipient, the amount of funding received and description of the project for which funding was received.

First Responder Compensation Payments

- M11. Ms Wright:
A return showing a list of all payments, organized by year and occupation, made during the period from December 9,

2020, to March 31, 2024, under the Heroes' Compensation Act to a first responder who died as a result of an accident.

Invest Alberta Corporation Employment

- M13. Mr. Ellingson:
A return showing a list of all employees and contractors employed or engaged by the Invest Alberta Corporation during the period from March 31, 2019, to March 31, 2024.

Compassionate Payments

- M15. Member Batten:
A return showing a list showing the number of payments, referred to as "compassionate payments," made by the government to families affected by child care closures in the Calgary area due to the E coli outbreak declared by Alberta Health Services on September 4, 2023, and the amount of each payment.

Infrastructure Priorities

- M16. Mr. Deol:
A return showing a list of the current infrastructure priorities that have been identified by the Minister of Infrastructure and the Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors further to the objectives set out in the Premier's mandate letters to those ministers dated July 26, 2023, and July 11, 2023, respectively.

4:10 Infrastructure Procurement Process

- M18. Mr. Deol:
A return showing a list of all amounts paid by the Ministry of Infrastructure to unsuccessful proponents of a procurement process involving a public-private partnership for an infrastructure project, organized by year and by project, during the period from May 1, 2019, to March 31, 2024.

The Acting Clerk: I wish to further advise the Assembly that the following motions for returns have been withdrawn: Motion for a Return 2 and Motion for a Return 3.

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

Provincial Highways Maintenance Contracts

- M6. Mr. Dach moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a list of all amendments made during the period from March 31, 2019, to March 31, 2024, to provincial highways maintenance contracts in respect of maintenance service levels.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I am pleased to rise this afternoon to speak to Motion for a Return 6, and of course I bring this up because of the long-term historical deficit in Alberta's highway maintenance performance.

Historically, Madam Speaker, I do recall, as a much younger person when travelling with grandparents or parents on holidays or trips through other parts of the province and into neighbouring provinces of B.C. and Saskatchewan, Alberta roads, when you return home to Alberta, would be noticeably better. Even without looking outside the window, you could tell that you'd once again reached into Alberta from Saskatchewan or British Columbia because, in my younger years, the roads were better in Alberta. Even without looking outside the window, you could tell that you'd gotten back into the province.

However, that's changed in years succeeding my younger years, and what's happened now, Madam Speaker, is that we historically have a situation where around 42 per cent of Alberta's highways are noted to be in poor or fair condition. I don't think that most Albertans find this to be acceptable, and I would hasten to say that we on this side of the House don't find that to be acceptable either. In this day and age, when the government of the day has issued a mandate letter to the current Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors which includes some rather aspirational goals of looking into high-speed rail throughout the province, we still can't get our highways maintained to an adequate level that would keep them in good shape and avoid costly rebuilding of our roads.

So that's the reason, Madam Speaker, that I asked for these lists of all amendments that are made from March 31, 2019, to March 31, 2024, to provincial highways maintenance contracts in respect of maintenance service levels, wanting to find out exactly what's going on with respect to the province's inability to maintain Alberta highways in an acceptable condition.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

Now, most people who travel Alberta's highways will notice – including highways that are in the constituency of the current Speaker sitting in the chair in the area of Athabasca, Westlock. I know I received complaints that were vociferous around highway 55. People were wearing T-shirts saying: can't drive 55. I took special effort to go up to that region, Mr. Speaker, and found for myself the condition of highway 55 to be in pretty tough shape. It was certainly one of those highways which fell in the realm of poor if not fair condition.

There was some remediation that was done as a result of advocacy made to this House by myself and others who were involved in trying to get that highway up to par, but it shouldn't have come to that, Mr. Speaker, if indeed the maintenance standards that the province maintained were at a level that Albertans have in the past come to expect and hope to see once again in the future. The whole reasoning behind my wanting to see the evidence of any alterations to provincial maintenance contracts was to get a handle on internally just, indeed, what efforts have been made to try to actually reach a higher standard of road maintenance in the province.

Now, there's an interesting website. It's the website of the Alberta Roadbuilders & Heavy Construction Association, which has a wealth of historical information about Alberta's road building and some of the relationships that have been ongoing between the Alberta roadbuilders construction association and all its members and the government of Alberta over time. It appears that there was a major breakdown in communications between the road building construction association and all its member companies and the provincial government, particularly the Alberta ministry of transportation, that took place around 2011, and it didn't seem to have been corrected since.

Now, a more current example of that breakdown in communication and trust is something that is chronicled by the Alberta Roadbuilders & Heavy Construction Association. I'm quoting here now from the website of the Alberta Roadbuilders & Heavy Construction Association, that is in part:

government's decision to cancel the Deerfoot Trail Upgrading P3 Procurement. This two-year process, encouraged companies to put together consortiums of construction, engineering, legal and finance companies to design, build and finance a massive upgrade to the central Calgary freeway. Although warned government was asking for a gold-plated project and had seriously under-estimated the costs of the construction and maintenance . . . proponents were advised to proceed through all stages . . . [of] the program.

Private companies and Alberta taxpayers spent millions of dollars developing proposals.

However,

on July 12, 2022, the Minister of Alberta Transportation announced that after receiving bids, no winner would be declared, and he was cancelling the program outright.

This is the direct quote:

This has seriously damaged the credibility of Alberta Transportation as a business partner. Taxpayers will pay more for less as companies have to protect themselves by charging more when they do work for an unreliable partner.

“When they do work for an unreliable partner”: he's talking about the Alberta ministry of transportation and this current government, Mr. Speaker, an unreliable partner in major business and infrastructure projects. Does that sound familiar to anybody else in this Legislature and to Albertans as far as what's happened recently with the government's reputation when we're talking about cancelled projects and infrastructure projects of multiple billions of dollars? The government yanks the carpet out from underneath all of those who were told the money is there, we're going ahead with it, yet indeed that's not what happened.

I think green line comes to mind, Mr. Speaker, and I would venture to say that it's not the only example that one could come up with, the related but certainly equally as devastating decision to halt development of a major industry. The renewables industry in this province suffered a similar stunning blow when the government decided to yank the carpet out from underneath the development of that industry. So when it comes to wanting to find out the story behind what's exactly going on at Alberta transportation with respect to highway maintenance, it's important that we take a look at any efforts to scramble behind the scenes and alter contracts that may have been deficient and to look at the details of the provincial highways maintenance contracts in respect of maintenance service levels, which historically have been woefully inadequate.

We've all driven Alberta highways. We drive them quite often to get to this place, Mr. Speaker, and all the way around the province. I mean, I've driven them a lot as well, and I can report factually myself that I'm shocked at some of the pieces of highway 2 between Calgary and Edmonton that are woefully inadequate in terms of their maintenance. It speaks to a standard that is unacceptable in this province.

4:20

We can talk about building a railway between Edmonton and Calgary or Banff and Calgary and speak about it as though it's something that we should aspire to, spend \$9 million on a study that hasn't been released yet, yet we seem to think it's not important to focus on the needs of rural Alberta and the economic corridors we already have, that being our highway infrastructure and making sure that is absolutely up to snuff.

It behooves the Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors to make sure that those relationships that are in place between his ministry and Alberta transportation are ones that are not soured by poor business decisions that cost Alberta billions and result in our highways still being in poor condition.

The Acting Speaker: I thank the member. Does the Member for Edmonton-McClung wish to move Motion for a Return 6?

Mr. Dach: I do so move.

The Acting Speaker: You so move.

Are there others wishing to speak to Motion for a Return 6? I have the Member for Calgary-North East who has risen.

Member Brar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's highways are an important part of infrastructure and our economy. They belong to Albertans, and it is an integral part of Alberta's government to take care of those highways because Albertans' lives, their livelihoods, and their safety depends on this. There are so many of my constituents, including my brother, who work in the trucking industry. I have heard horrible stories from them, telling me about the poor road conditions due to poor weather conditions. They already face so many problems. They already face so many issues, whether it be the lack of truck stops, whether it be the lack of rest areas, whether it be the lack of important facilities where they can park and they can get food, something to eat. They get parking tickets all the time just because of the lack of these infrastructure facilities where they can actually stop, take rest, grab some food. These facilities are lacking in Alberta. I've seen my family worried when my brother is out driving his truck to B.C., and they pray for his safe return home.

This is not only the story of my brother. This is the story of thousands of Albertans who leave their homes, leave their families behind to make their living and to keep our economy running and to keep food on our tables. Mr. Speaker, it is the paramount duty of any government to make sure that all Albertans feel safe. It is the paramount duty of the government to ensure safe road conditions. We have seen Alberta's road conditions deteriorating. Today in the morning when I left for Edmonton, I got constant calls from my family here in Calgary, as well as my parents in India. They were deeply worried about the weather conditions, about the road conditions. I want to take a moment to thank all the workers who are out there taking care of our roads in these conditions.

That's not only my story, Mr. Speaker. There were thousands of other Albertans on the road, on the highways, getting to their destination, and they were facing similar conditions. I want to highlight that on this side of the House we believe that government should be transparent and accountable to the Albertans who have elected us. Therefore, it is important for the government to disclose the details that they need to know, as their lives and livelihoods depend on it.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's highways were once the pride of this province, a symbol of our strength and efficiency. Today, sadly, this reputation is under threat. We constantly hear from Albertans – drivers, business owners, and municipal leaders – about the increasingly poor state of our highways and government's lack of meaningful response. The government's own annual report of Transportation and Economic Corridors shows us the reality. Approximately 43 per cent of Alberta's highways are now rated in poor, fair, or very poor condition, and this is concerning. The percentage of highways rated as good has dropped from 60.3 per cent in 2019-2020 to just 58 per cent in 2022-2023. That's not progress; that's deterioration.

Meanwhile, the government spent a significant amount of Albertans' money on highway rehabilitation projects in 2022 and 2023. If I'm correct, it is \$442.6 million spent. This isn't just about asphalt; it's about accountability, safety, and public trust. We know the government has made changes to highway maintenance contracts. Albertans deserve to know the details; Albertans deserve to know the full details of those contracts. This is why I believe that it is very important that my colleague the Member for Edmonton-McClung has asked this government to do the right thing. I fully support him, and I request all my colleagues to support this important motion.

The government must disclose the list of all amendments made to provincial highway maintenance contracts from March 31, 2019, to March 31, 2024. If this government truly believes in transparency and responsible stewardship of public funds, this is a simple thing to do and an easy thing to do.

Mr. Speaker, the safety of Albertans travelling on highways depends on proper maintenance and proper investment. Let's ensure we are

doing the right thing for the people of this province. I fully support my colleague in this step, and I request all my colleagues to do the same.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I'd like to thank the two NDP members for their work on this file and the questions that they just had. But I'm recommending this request related to Motion for a Return 6, which seeks a list of all amendments made between March 31, 2019, and March 31, 2024, to provincial highway maintenance contract service levels, be rejected.

I'll tell you why. The information requested is currently being used as part of ongoing contract negotiations and tendering processes. Transportation is vital in governance, but we must recognize that certain details are sensitive. The disclosure of such information would compromise the integrity of current and future contract negotiations.

Now, sharing confidential negotiation details could give potential contractors unwarranted insight into the government's negotiation strategies, jeopardizing our ability to secure competitive bids and protect taxpayers' dollars. Moreover, the information requested includes documents used during negotiations between contractors and the department after an RFP, or request for proposal, process was completed. Finally, Mr. Speaker, the competitive environment in which these contracts exist relies on preserving the confidentiality of negotiated service levels and bid adjustments.

Now, if this motion were adopted, we'd risk creating an uneven playing field while discouraging potential bidders from participating in future procurement opportunities, ultimately harming the province's ability to achieve value for money. For these reasons, Mr. Speaker, I firmly believe rejecting Motion for a Return 6 is in the best interests of Albertans and taxpayers.

But the NDP should know better, and I believe they do because if you actually look at the wording in this motion, it specifically starts after their four years of disastrous government when they actually were on this side of the House, Mr. Speaker. I was actually there; I was sitting in that corner during the four years of the NDP.

Mr. Nixon: The dark years.

Mr. Dreeshen: Very, very dark years, yes.

Under the NDP government it was the then NDP transportation minister sitting on this side of the House, Brian Mason, who would have said the exact same things that I'm saying here today had this motion gone back during his time, Mr. Speaker. I think the NDP does know better, yet for petty partisan reasons they're still asking and feigning outrage. I can only assume that that's the direction that they're getting from Trudeau's choice for Alberta, their new NDP leader, Naheed Nenshi.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

4:30

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Any other members wishing to speak? I'll recognize the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak against this motion. I'll premise my commentary on this with a quote that I've used before in the House and I'll probably use again because it means so much to me. I think it's something that all people involved in government should be aware of. The quote comes from an economist called Thomas Sowell, who said that there are no

solutions; there are only trade-offs. The question that that raises here is: what is the trade-off that you're asking for?

You're asking to publicize confidential contracting information against the best interests of this government to conclude contracts in the future in the best possible way for taxpayers. I'm frankly shocked and amazed that the member would suggest that that type of information would be made available. This is not the way the government should operate. It's not the way contracting on long-term, very sizable contracts should operate. The obvious implications and consequences of doing such a thing should be obvious to the member opposite.

The member, in their statements, made a comment about the decision by the government not to proceed on some P3 contracts that had been discussed on Deerfoot Trail. Does the government not have a responsibility? Is the NDP suggesting to the members of this House that the government does not have a responsibility to make sure that there is value for dollars? If a contract situation is arising that does not provide value for dollars spent, they should be rejecting that process, going back and doing some more homework, and coming up with a different solution that will provide value to the taxpayers of this province.

Now, I know the NDP, when they were in government, were not particularly interested in providing value, which is one reason why we have this huge debt that we've inherited from the NDP government. It's interesting to note that the interest that we're now paying on that accumulated debt is actually greater than the budget item of transportation. There's a trade-off to be spending money without criteria, without value. The trade-off is currently that now the taxpayers of Alberta have to spend billions of dollars on interest payments on some very questionable expenditures by the NDP when they were in government.

The member opposite also talked about the green line and the decision by this government to pause or stop the current process that was going on and go back to relook at the design of the green line. The people on this side of the House are very interested in having a green line or a project that would provide Calgarians an option for transportation. However, let's review the history of that particular project, that was initiated by the current leader of the party opposite and accepted by the previous leader of the side opposite: \$4.5 billion for 43 kilometres of green line; 29 stations extending from the extreme north of Calgary, 160th Avenue, to Seton.

Now, I don't know how the city of Calgary or the government of the day evaluated the cost for that particular project, but let's recognize what is the latest proposal that we had that the government had to look at, going from 43 kilometres of green line and 29 stations from both extreme sides of Calgary to 10 kilometres and seven stations going from Eau Claire to Lynnwood. The original project for the green line probably – and, of course, we don't have exact information on that, but I've heard numbers, recognizing that that particular project still doesn't even include crossing the Bow River, that could exceed \$20 billion.

So what do you do when the initial estimate cost is nowhere close to what actually it would cost? Do you just keep going along? My constituents are telling me they're interested in the green line, but they want value for dollars spent. Are you going to say to Calgarians that it's okay to spend \$6.2 billion for a project that is a fraction of what it used to be and only goes from Lynnwood to Eau Claire? I welcome, I invite you to go down to Calgary and talk to our constituents and tell Calgarians, because it's not only the taxpayers of Alberta that are paying for that; it's also the taxpayers of Calgary that would be paying the cost for a value that is questionable.

We hope here, on this side of the House, that we can find more value for Calgarians, more value for Albertans. That's why we're going through the process right now. We all know that people within the city council and the previous green line committee worked very hard to try to come up with a project, and I commend them for all their work and what they did. But the fact of the matter is that the result had to be relooked at, and we had to come back and look at something different. So I would suggest to the member opposite that they should rethink and perhaps reconsider the kind of – you want to make this political? Really? I mean, you know, when do you admit that a project needs to be relooked at and needs to be redone?

Anyways, with that, I would suggest that, for the reasons that the minister already indicated, no, we're not going to open up tendering documentation to the public because, for obvious reasons, no government would do such a thing. The green line project needs to be relooked at for obvious reasons. So let's try to do what's best for the taxpayers of Alberta, for the people of Alberta. Let's be prudent in the way we're spending money, and let's try to get the best value for them on these types of projects.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: I'll recognize the Member for Sherwood Park, followed by the Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Mr. Kasawski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hope the Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville also highlights some of the roads and highways that need attention in our neighbouring ridings because there is some attention needed by the Minister of Infrastructure. He's got a map to prove it.

Let's move away from this hyperfocus on Calgary that seems to be brought into this House, and let's turn our attention to Strathcona county, where there are 1,300 kilometres . . .

Mr. Getson: You started it.

Mr. Kasawski: Yeah. Well, I don't recall that. Did we? Actually, I don't recall that.

But I do recall that when I looked at the website for Strathcona county, there are 1,300 kilometres of roads, rural roads, and ditches in Strathcona county, and there are 418 kilometres in Sherwood Park, my riding. So it's really important to ensure safe and quality transportation.

One thing that is noticeable to people of Sherwood Park is that when you leave Sherwood Park and you move onto a provincial highway, the roads get noticeably worse, so we need to pay attention to that. We need the minister, when he's looking at our highways that are in Sherwood Park, in Strathcona county, like Anthony Henday, highway 16 or Yellowhead Trail, highway 21, highway 14, highway 824, highway 830, highway 630 – we need him to take some arguments to Treasury Board on the value of investment. Some research and just some quick looking at it looks like if we can just increase 10 per cent of our spend on maintenance infrastructure, we'll increase our GDP for the whole province by 4 per cent. Bring those numbers in an argument to Treasury Board, Minister, so that we in Strathcona county and Sherwood Park and other places across the province can count on high-quality highways.

Right now, as it was brought up, we are trying to find out why, when we drive and look, we find out that 42 per cent of our highways are in poor or very poor condition. What is going on in this province? We're looking for some transparency. What is going on in this province that 42 per cent of our highways are in poor or very poor condition? Good highways equal higher productivity.

When I think back to some conversations I've had with constituents, in the election I had one person that just grilled me, and I, at the end,

had to say: what is your background? They were asking about our investment. They were going to vote based on the platforms of investment from the two different parties, and they were hyperfocused on investment in education and investment in infrastructure. They viewed that as a primary role for government because investment in highways, just like investment in education, translates into economic productivity.

4:40

Minister, please bring this investment mindset to Treasury Board when you go. We're trying to get some transparency on what is going on in this province and why the investments are not being made. We don't need to spend more money on pet projects. I think we've had enough discussion in this House about Turkish Tylenol, about pipelines to nowhere, about research into chemtrails. What we need is focus on investment in this province, and we're asking the government to bring an investment mindset forward as we prepare for this budgetary cycle. The question that the member asked is a reasonable question so that we can understand why the investments aren't being made, and if they are, let's be transparent about it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak to Motion for a Return 6. The motion requests that the Assembly "issue for a return showing a list of all amendments made during the period from March 31, 2019, to March 31, 2024, to provincial highways maintenance contracts in respect of maintenance service levels."

This is a bit of a mouthful, Mr. Speaker, but I want to ensure I had it there for the record because I'm recommending that this request be rejected. I have a few reasons to recommend this, which I would like to mention to you before unpacking them individually. One, the requested information is confidential and commercially sensitive, being used in ongoing contract negotiations and tender processes. Two, sharing the information could negatively affect current and future negotiations and tendering. Three, the information includes documents from post RFPs, or request for proposals. These negotiations happen between contractors and the department and are not to be shared. Four, the negotiated terms and contract amounts differ across contracts, reflecting varying levels of service. Five, contractors are unaware of each other's terms, and that information is not publicly available.

Before I continue, Mr. Speaker, I think it is important to remember what we are talking about here. The information that is being requested in this motion is about provincial highways maintenance contracts. Highways are vital to our way of life here in Alberta, in the prairies, especially in my constituency of Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville. Whenever I drive from my constituency to Edmonton, I'm trusting in the highways being well maintained and Mother Nature co-operating. We all depend on them, whether by driving on them ourselves or relying upon the goods and services that are transported upon them. We use highways to get to work, to visit family and friends, or explore our amazing province. They tie our communities together. They link rural Alberta to urban Alberta. They connect us to our neighbours. Highways bring us to British Columbia to the west, Saskatchewan to the east, the Northwest Territories to the north, and, of course, to our neighbours, the United States, in the south.

Mr. Speaker, whichever direction you choose to look, the importance of highways to Alberta cannot be exaggerated. Therefore, keeping highways maintained is something I think we could all agree

on as being very, very important. It is also important to remember the importance of respecting contracts and confidentiality. To be a bit blunt, publicly revealing the requested information would be damaging to Alberta both reputationally and commercially. Confidential and commercially sensitive information is just that: sensitive. It is the basis of ongoing talks over contracts and tendering. Revealing information like that would do more hurt than it would help. As every member of the Assembly knows, keeping one's word is important, and it is important that the government of Alberta keep its word to those who it has contracts with, with the minimum expectation to respect confidentiality.

[The Speaker in the chair]

To my second point, Mr. Speaker, the impact on negotiations, publicly revealing the requested information could negatively affect current and future negotiations in tendering. I don't think it would be much of a surprise to anyone here that trust is one of the most fundamental elements of successful negotiations. By revealing the requested information, we might cause prospective applicants to change their current or future requests when negotiating or tendering. Negotiation documents are also not meant to be shared publicly. I do not think this is a controversial position, Mr. Speaker. The requested information includes documents from post request for proposal negotiations between contractors and the department. They are not meant to be shared.

A request for proposal, or RFP, is a business document that announces a project, describes it, and solicits bids from qualified contractors to complete it. The Alberta government evaluates these bids, including the financial health of the bidding company and each bidder's ability to take on the project. The point of these RFPs is to open up the competition to a broader range of companies, removing bias from the system, and get the best value for money. That would be our taxpayers' money.

I will point out, Mr. Speaker, that the best value for money is not always the cheapest bid. The ability to effectively undertake the project is an important consideration. Sharing these documents publicly would make it difficult to ensure a true and honest competition in the market. This would mean that Alberta taxpayers may see more money being spent on future projects than might otherwise be the case.

Varied contract terms are also a consideration with the negotiated terms and contract amounts differing across contracts and reflecting varying levels of service. There may be a variety of reasons for contracts to vary in terms, and publicly revealing them may not benefit the service of the contract.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I note that contractors are unaware of each other's terms, and that information is not publicly accessible. There's a simple reason for that. In the business world companies tend to keep their own information private. It's not the government of Alberta's place to expose private companies to potential losses through publicly revealing sensitive commercial information.

Again, let us return to the issue at hand: highways and maintenance. We need our highways, and we need to ensure that they are maintained. If the Legislative Assembly makes a habit of revealing contracts relating to our highways, we risk jeopardizing the long-term safety of the same highways. Companies won't want to bid on government of Alberta contracts if they have a reason to believe they will suffer potential financial harm.

Alberta taxpayers do not want to tamper with a system that prioritizes efficiency and responsible fiscal stewardship, and I'm sure that the government of Alberta does not want to develop a reputation for being an entity that is known for disclosing confidential and commercially sensitive information, so when we're discussing Motion for a Return 6, I do not consider it appropriate to support the

request. It is simply not necessary, and this is why, Mr. Speaker, I will be rejecting Motion for a Return 6.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Motion for a Return 6: are there others wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors. I'm sorry; the hon. minister has already provided his comments.

Is there anyone other than the minister that would like to join in the conversation? Seeing none, I am prepared to call on the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung to close debate if he wishes to do so. It would appear not. Would you like to close debate or not?

An Hon. Member: I'll do it for you.

The Speaker: Unfortunately, that's not allowed.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion for a Return 6 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:49 p.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Brar	Haji	Sabir
Ceci	Hayter	Shepherd
Chapman	Hoyle	Sigurdson, L.
Dach	Kasawski	Sweet
Eremenko	Renaud	Tejada
Goehring		

Against the motion:

Amery	Jones	Sawhney
Armstrong-Homeniuk	LaGrange	Sigurdson, R.J.
Boitchenko	Loewen	Sinclair
Bouchard	Long	Singh
Cyr	Lovely	Stephan
de Jonge	Lunty	Turton
Dreeshen	McDougall	van Dijken
Dyck	McIver	Wiebe
Fir	Nally	Williams
Getson	Nixon	Wilson
Glubish	Petrovic	Wright, J.
Hunter	Pitt	Yao
Johnson	Rowswell	Yaseen
Totals:	For – 16	Against – 39

[Motion for a Return 6 lost]

Motions Other than Government Motions

First Responder Auxiliary Workforce

516. Mr. Long moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to consider taking the necessary steps to develop an auxiliary workforce program for local residents, volunteer associations, and landowners to supplement the work of first responders during emergencies and disasters.

Mr. Long: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to move Motion 516. Confirming the safety of Albertans in the face of natural disasters and emergencies is a top priority for this government. In recent years we've seen an increasing number of devastating events, from wildfires to floods and storms. The fires in West Yellowhead these

past few years have highlighted some critical issues, including the limitations of emergency response when there are multiple disasters happening all over the province and all over the country at the same time.

While Alberta's first responders do incredible work – and we are extremely grateful for their efforts – the scale of modern disasters often exceeds the capacity of immediately available resources. In moments of crisis local knowledge and community involvement can make all the difference. That's why I believe it is crucial to develop an Alberta-made solution, an auxiliary workforce program that will allow us to better respond to these disasters and emergencies by mobilizing local residents, volunteer associations, and landowners.

Mr. Speaker, used appropriately, local residents, landowners, and volunteers, those who know the land and the community, can prove to be a vital addition to the immediate response. In remote areas the local expertise proves invaluable, helping to guide first responders and support critical operations. By establishing an auxiliary workforce program, we would be able to tap into this resource, supplementing the efforts of our professional emergency responders.

The current reliance on federal assistance, especially the Canadian Armed Forces, has shown its limitations. While emergency response is shared among local, provincial, territorial, and federal jurisdictions, the Canadian Armed Forces are expected to provide aid to the civil power as a force of last resource. As noted in a 2024 report from the House of Commons, requests for the Canadian Armed Forces' assistance to support civilian authorities have increased significantly due to climate-related disasters.

In fact, according to the Department of National Defence the number of Canadian Armed Forces' deployments to assist civilian authorities in Canada has roughly doubled every five years since 2010. However, as we know, the Armed Forces are not always readily available, and relying too heavily on federal resources can create delays in the immediate response. The Canadian Armed Forces are under significant pressure, not only from domestic needs but also due to Canada's obligations abroad. Global conflicts continue to flare up, from the ongoing crisis in Ukraine to tensions in the Asia Pacific.

With the vastness of our great country and the numerous responsibilities the Armed Forces already shoulder, ranging from maintaining sovereignty in the north to addressing both domestic and international challenges, they are already stretched thin, with limited resources to manage everything effectively at once, so it's crucial that provinces and we as a province gain more autonomy and self-reliance in our efforts against natural disasters.

As disasters become more frequent and severe, Alberta must take proactive steps to build its own capacity to respond, and for that I do want to give a shout-out to our Minister of Forestry and Parks for all of his efforts the last few years to make sure that we are prepared for future and current needs. It's simply not sustainable to depend on federal forces, who are already facing growing demands of their limited resources. By developing an Alberta-specific emergency auxiliary workforce, we can reduce our dependency on federal aid and increase our own autonomy in disaster management.

5:10

In addition to supporting our first responders, this program will also foster a culture of preparedness within local communities. When individuals and families see their neighbours taking an active role in emergency response, it strengthens the overall resilience of the province. You see, Mr. Speaker, I have seen in my own communities how willing and eager the locals are to help respond to emergencies. Rather than be in the habit of simply pushing people aside or making them leave their communities behind, by tapping into local knowledge, we can ensure that Alberta has the flexibility to act quickly in the face of disaster regardless of what

happens on the national or international stage. This initiative will allow Alberta to take control of its own emergency response efforts, ensuring that we are not caught off guard when the next disaster strikes.

It's not just about enhancing the efficiency of our response. It's about ensuring that we as Albertans have the resources and resilience to protect our communities when we need it most. We would have a dedicated, trained workforce that could be deployed as needed, ensuring faster, more effective responses.

This motion would also allow us to strengthen community preparedness and resilience. By training local residents and volunteers, we empower communities to take an active role in their own safety and the safety of their neighbours. This kind of community-led response will improve the efficiency of emergency operations and also build stronger, more self-reliant communities that are better able to withstand future crises. Local residents, landowners, and volunteers bring invaluable skills and knowledge to the table. Whether guiding first responders through difficult terrain, providing logistical support, or helping manage evacuation efforts, this auxiliary workforce would supplement the work of our first responders and ensure a more coordinated, effective disaster response.

Alberta must be proactive in developing strategies to address growing challenges. By establishing an auxiliary workforce program now, we can ensure that Alberta is better prepared for the emergencies that lie ahead. Not only would this program increase the capacity and efficiency of our emergency response, but it would also reduce the strain on our first responders, allowing them to focus on critical tasks. Time is of the essence in emergencies, and the more resources we have at our disposal, the quicker we can act to save lives and mitigate damage.

Mr. Speaker, this motion calls for a proactive, Alberta-specific solution to the challenges we face in emergency response. By developing an emergency auxiliary workforce program, we would confirm that local communities are ready to assist first responders during crises, building a stronger, more resilient province. This initiative will enhance our capacity to respond to natural disasters and emergencies, ultimately making Alberta a safer place for all of us.

I urge my colleagues and every member of this Assembly to support Motion 516 so we can work together to protect the lives, the communities, and the well-being of all Albertans. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Member for West Yellowhead has moved Motion other than Government Motion 516. Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate? It would seem the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning would like to.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise and to speak to this motion. I appreciate the member opposite's concern around the need to ensure that we have individuals available to respond in times of emergency. We've seen this numerous times throughout the province when it's come to the wildfires that we've seen over the last few years and when we've seen floods happening such as what happened in Calgary and through Canmore in the mountains and the importance of making sure that we have first responders.

Now, what we also have to ensure is community safety, and when I speak to first responders who work in this area and who have been dealing with many of these emergency responses over the last couple of years, their primary concern is ensuring that when they ask people to evacuate and to get out of the zones so that they're able to get in there and provide, whether it be structural firefighting or whether it be looking at wildland firefighting or just getting

people out because they're worried about their safety – they face individuals who refuse to participate and refuse to do that.

When this motion came forward, the concern that came up out of that was: what would this look like, and how would this be managed to ensure community safety and to ensure we didn't have individuals who just decided that they would be the ones to respond and that they had the understanding and the expertise or felt that they had the understanding and the expertise to do that?

I have an amendment to the motion.

The Speaker: Hon. member, if you just wait a moment, I'm going to get a copy of the amendment both to the table as well as to the mover.

Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 41(5.2) an amendment to a motion other than a Government motion, moved after the motion has been moved, must

(a) be approved by Parliamentary Counsel no later than the Thursday preceding . . . the motion is moved,

of which this amendment has been also approved by Parliamentary Counsel, and

(b) be provided to the mover of the motion no later than 11 a.m. on the day the motion is [to be] moved.

I can confirm that in an e-mail earlier today that both my office as well as the mover was CCed on, both of the conditions in which to make an amendment to a motion other than a government motion have been met.

This amendment is in order. It will be referred to as amendment A1.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I did some consultation on this motion to ensure that our first responders that would be managing and working with individuals through this auxiliary workforce were consulted to ensure that they understood what this motion could entail, and when I spoke to the different organizations and public-sector first responders that are doing this, their response to me was: sure, but we do this.

I guess I should read the motion into the record. To be clear, I move this on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, to move that Motion Other than Government Motion 516 be amended by striking out "first responders during emergencies and disasters" and substituting "provincially-regulated first responders during emergencies and disasters, and by using certified training programs provided by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, firefighters, paramedics, First Nations and Métis settlements." The reason for that, Mr. Speaker, is that the RCMP do have a program that does have the capacity to train individuals to be able to be first responders in times of emergency.

The interesting fact about that, Mr. Speaker, however, is that it's been defunded by the government of Alberta, so it no longer exists. The curriculum exists, the ability to train individuals in their local communities to be able to be responders exists, but the funding has been cut by the province to provide that service. What happens when the RCMP does this training is that then they create a roster of people that have been approved by the emergency teams in their local communities, the RCMP specifically, and then they can call them and say: "Please come out and help. We know we've trained you, we know we vetted you, and we know you're safe to be able to provide this service." Great. So that's one example of where it's worked, and it's a great thing.

I've spoken to firefighters across the province as well, who have also said we have the ability to train local community members who want to come out and provide support. In fact, many of our agricultural communities do this. They already provide training to producers in agricultural communities in case they have a grass fire so that they know what to do and they can go out and they can help their neighbours.

So it exists, but it exists under the structure of the first responders and the firefighters in those local communities. So, again, they can create a roster, ensure people are trained appropriately, and they know who they are so they can call on them in times of needs.

Mr. Speaker, the intent behind this and the reason for the amendment was because I would hate to see redundancy or red tape being created by this government that would create a secondary training program that is outside of the expertise of the certified first responders that are already in the province. They know what works. They know how to train community members, and they know that through their training they're able to keep community members safe instead of having communities developing new training that could potentially have individuals feel like they're entitled to being able to just show up in a community and provide assistance without the appropriate training, without the relationship to the first responders that are already there and, in fact, creating safety issues because they get in the way.

5:20

There's nothing wrong with having Albertans want to step up and help. I mean, search and rescue is a prime example of that. The program that the RCMP offered, actually, up until a couple of years ago was a great example of that. Our volunteer firefighters that are willing to work in rural communities are a great example of that. Albertans want to help, and I don't think there should be a barrier preventing them from doing it. But what I do believe is that you need to make sure that people are trained appropriately and that they're vetted appropriately so that in the end nobody gets hurt and, in fact, they're more help than they are a barrier. The last thing we want to see is a group of individuals who've decided they're an auxiliary workforce who end up refusing to evacuate a situation when they've been told to leave and now we have firefighters trying to get people out of community areas when they should have probably just left and now they're dealing with human safety instead of structural safety.

I support what the member is saying needs to be done. I mean, I would have loved the government just to hire more firefighters so we didn't have to worry about an auxiliary workforce. I mean, let's fund wildland firefighters. Let's train them earlier. Let's get them ready for the season. That would be a great step. Instead of having to ask the government to create an auxiliary workforce, just fund the workers that we need. We know they're trained appropriately. We know that they know what to do. We don't have the same turnover. We don't have to face the fact that most of them leave and go to B.C. because B.C. has year-round firefighting services.

We know that part of the reason why we've had struggles is because of the fact that the government continues to be delayed in getting prepared earlier, in hiring when they need to, in training earlier, and ensuring that we have the workforce available. So now all of a sudden it's: well, let's create an auxiliary workforce. Well, why wouldn't you just fund the people? Fund the workers that do the work, that want to do the work, instead of relying on volunteers to have to come in on an ad hoc basis. I mean, that's the fundamental problem. It's about not having enough people when we need them because the government is not ready. Then it's also about the fact that we need to make sure that when workers are working, they're kept safe, and safety requires training and requires resources and requires equipment, all of which need to be under the purview of the province.

Mr. Speaker, I agree we need more people to be able to respond to emergency situations. I believe the province has a responsibility to do that. I believe the province should be hiring workers to do that. If they're not, let's have an auxiliary workforce, I guess, but let's make sure it's being done under the expertise of certified emergency responders who can train them and vet them appropriately.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, prior to calling the hon. Member for West Yellowhead to speak to the amendment, I would be remiss if I don't make sure that everyone received an invite to the former member and current member reception that will be taking place in the Capital View Room between 6 and 8 this evening. Please feel free to come, but please feel no obligation either.

The hon. Member for West Yellowhead on amendment A1.

Mr. Long: Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate when the Member for Edmonton-Manning gets up to speak. I know she's very passionate about our forestry sector, our forests, and even our rural communities. For someone who represents a community in the Edmonton region, it's really nice to see her passion for that. But I will speak today in opposition to the proposed amendment to the original motion. While I appreciate the member's intention, I'll argue, actually, that the amendment does not advance the purpose of the motion.

Prior to that, I would like to actually make a few comments around some of the things that were just discussed around wildfire firefighters. I know that we have year-round firefighters in Alberta – there's been a significant increase in the budget for them – and I know, again, the minister responsible has been very proactive in reviving the program in the last number of years and seeing the priority of making sure that he's got a fully integrated workforce year-round. As I said earlier, I appreciated his efforts in that.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The other one that I heard early on in the member's speech was concerns around people who refused to evacuate. That in and of itself, Madam Speaker, is a concern, yes. However, over some of the fires that we've seen in my riding, I know that locals have actually helped the professionals that have shown up on scene from putting themselves in vulnerable situations; namely, letting them know where certain roads dead-end that they didn't have that knowledge of when they came in to fight the fire. If those locals hadn't shown that concern for their community and for the first responders coming in, some of our first responders could have been put in very vulnerable situations. So, again, to just dismiss the locals who have skills and talent and resources available to assist in these efforts is often going to lend to worse results than it would otherwise, you know, by embracing those individuals.

With that, I'd just like to say that the individuals who are locals: while they might not be provincially regulated, they play a critical role in stabilizing the situations before additional help arrives. By amending the motion to limit the definition of first responders, we're effectively disregarding the community members and the experience and motivation they have to act in the emergencies even if they don't hold provincial certification. The fact of the matter is that farmers and landowners in communities in these regions often face unique challenges during emergencies, whether they're wildfires, floods, or other natural disasters, that require practical, on-the-ground solutions.

The training provided by provincial or federal agencies is not always tailored to the specific needs of those rural areas, nor does it always offer the kind of practical land-based knowledge needed to protect agricultural land, livestock, or crops during times of crises. Farmers who know the land better than anyone else often have the experience to make quick, effective decisions in emergency situations, understanding local geography and the vulnerabilities of their land. However, the proposed amendment would undermine the importance of this localized hands-on experience by requiring certification from specific training programs that do not address the practical needs of those communities.

The intent of Motion 516 is to be inclusive and responsive to the practical needs of all communities during disasters, and I strongly believe the original wording is better aligned with this objective, so I urge all members to reject the proposed amendment to Motion 516. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members to join in the amendment? The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to stand and speak to Motion 516 and offer some thoughts and perspective in my role as the opposition shadow minister for Public Safety and Emergency Services. First of all, I want to thank the Member for West Yellowhead for bringing this forward and, indeed, his clear passion for supporting his constituents, his clear support for first responders, and, certainly, his clear interest and support for finding ways that we can empower more Albertans to participate in protecting their communities.

Indeed, I know that we have heard that clearly, Madam Speaker, that Albertans want to have that opportunity to participate when their properties are facing a natural disaster, be that a wildfire or a flood or another natural disaster. They want to, wherever they can, be participants in how they protect those properties in their communities. Indeed, Madam Speaker, I would agree that we should support that wherever and whenever we can. Indeed, I would agree with the member – I would support him – and I believe him when he says that for his government this is a priority, to ensure that keeping Albertans safe is top of mind.

Now, when it comes to the question of this amendment, Madam Speaker, you know, the Member for West Yellowhead said that he appreciates the intention but doesn't feel it advances the purpose of the motion.

5:30

He spoke about the reference that my colleague from Edmonton-Manning made to individuals who refuse to evacuate. He said: you know, they can serve value. Perhaps they can help provide guidance to local first responders or folks who are coming in who don't know the land as well.

But I would note, Madam Speaker, that we have already begun to see some challenges with this. In the age in which we live in which there are increasing levels of misinformation and disinformation and folks who make misuse of social media and other things to spread conspiracy theories, we have unfortunately seen an undermining of trust in local authorities and indeed first responders when they are looking to clear areas.

We look at a news report from August 2023 in West Kelowna. The headline says: 'Fire Chief's Worst Nightmare': West Kelowna Crews Rescue Residents Who Ignored Evacuation Order. West Kelowna fire rescue chief Jason Brolund talks about that situation. He says that it's a fire chief's worst nightmare; those emergency responders were trapped because they were rescuing members of the public who had chosen not to leave.

While I appreciate what the Member for West Yellowhead is saying about the help that locals can provide to help protect first responders from getting in a bad situation, we have to recognize that when individuals locally do not have proper training and support, they can become a liability to those same first responders.

I recognize that the motion that the member is bringing forward is to consider how we can develop an auxiliary workforce program. I would assume as part of that program, then, we want to make sure there is proper training for those individuals. Again, the fact that the farmer knows the land better does not make that farmer a first responder. The fact that they know the area, they know the roads,

they know their land, does not necessarily mean that they are equipped to know how to deal with a raging wildfire or another natural disaster which may be coming through. That is why we have first responders who have that expertise.

The amendment that's been brought forward by my colleague from Edmonton-Manning is simply looking to ensure that where we have programs like this that have already existed and have existed before, we tap into those and make use of that expertise, that infrastructure that's already there, and that indeed we make sure we are making use of the expertise of those first responders to ensure that we provide the training and opportunities so that those individuals who do know their property, who do know their communities, who do know their land, also know the proper protocols for how they can best work with those first responders, those experts, to ensure that what we have is the best of all worlds, the combinations of their expertise to yield a better outcome and not a situation where there may be a mistake that indeed is going to endanger everyone involved.

Now, the Member for West Yellowhead spoke about his concerns around limiting the definition of first responder to those who hold certification. Madam Speaker, it brought to mind the fact that this is a government that did bring forward legislation specifically to protect the term "engineer" or to open up, I guess, that area around discussion of engineering in the province. Again, that is something where we talked about the challenges when we are adjusting definitions of expertise and the impact that can have.

In this case, yes, I think it is important that when we are talking about first responders, we are talking about people who have that certification because certification does mean something in terms of that expertise, that knowledge that they're able to bring to bear. To be clear, this is something where first responders, RCMP, local fire departments, have been willing to co-operate and collaborate.

It is very important, I think, Madam Speaker, that we ensure that there is proper training. Again, we support this motion. We support the involvement of local people in the community. We just want to ensure those individuals have the training and knowledge they need to work well with our first responders for the best possible outcomes.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the amendment? The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to the amendment for Motion other than Government Motion 516. Now, actually, I do agree with this amendment. I think it does take into account a number of the things that my colleagues have raised: local expertise in addition to the expertise of organizations like the RCMP and the auxiliary group that they have and all of the existing training.

But, Madam Speaker, I did want to bring up one previous motion that is very similar to the motion under debate today and just sort of bring up that it would have been quite nice to have any kind of report about the progress that was made on this motion. Now, I believe it was the Member for Central Peace-Notley, now the Minister of Forestry and Parks, that raised in June of 2020 Motion 505, and it read, "Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General to explore options to establish a voluntary civilian corps to assist law enforcement in Alberta."

Now, Madam Speaker, the reason I raise this is that we never really heard a peep about this particular motion after. We don't have any data to support whether or not this resolution was useful, if it was actually useful in achieving the goals that it outlined. Without that information it seems a little bit silly that we're discussing another motion that is planning to do very much the same thing.

[interjection] And I know the member likes to crinkle paper when I'm speaking, which is silly, but let's continue.

You know, I find it kind of ridiculous that the minister or the member at the time – actually, I think it was a minister. No; it would have been a member at the time, Madam Speaker. The Member for Central Peace-Notley felt that it was so important that we establish an auxiliary group to augment law enforcement, yet we've heard nothing since 2020, so that is alarming to see that this government is undertaking another motion to do something similar without any proof whatsoever. When 505, which was in June of 2020, was introduced, there was no data; we have nothing to look at.

So it seems a lot like members like to fire out motions, and then they just sort of go into the ether and we don't hear about them. So it would be great if the government or the minister has any data or information to share about that previous motion, and perhaps we can learn from that motion as we go forward with this one. With that, I'll take my seat.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: I seek speakers to the main motion. The hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'd like to thank the Member for West Yellowhead for bringing this forward. He and I share constituents in Yellowhead county, and we've had, I guess, the dubious honour of dealing with a couple of major events here in the last few years. I can tell you full well that this gentleman goes above and beyond to try to represent those areas and, moreover, with what took place this year in Yellowhead.

What we have before us, Madam Speaker – and I'm sure you can appreciate from your neck of the woods as well – is a common-sense approach. The MLA and I have spent a number of hours in town halls spending time with our constituents, obviously, with the counties, with the firefighting groups, with a number of the elements that are out there, and it was resounding, a couple of things that they want us to take care of. This was one of them: folks wanted to be able to be empowered with proper training. They wanted to look at an ability in a way to enhance those firefighting capabilities out there and allow people to do that as the first responders.

Coincidentally, there were a number of us that were down at a CSG event down in Oregon this last summer, and Idaho put something in place very similar, where it allows, if you would, a roster of people that can actually deal with these types of elements to: if you see something, do something. With that, we can understand full well in these circumstances that if you have a little tiny fire, then you can put it out before it becomes a big fire if you have folks with the ability and the capabilities, with the equipment and the training, et cetera, that conventional firefighting equipment.

Some of the members opposite might be familiar with, you know, the typical fire truck on a city street that comes down and rolls down, but out in the prairies and out near the forest lands there are a lot of folks that have different equipment out there that are very well versed in it, that work in the oil patch or work for the local counties, et cetera, or even on their own properties that can run those that aren't the traditional firefighting equipment. The exposure we had when we started dealing with our constituents and talking to those groups, they actually worked out really well when you had those abilities come to bear.

Coincidentally, Madam Speaker, when we started talking to some of the older hands in the area – and we had talked earlier today about our seniors. When we listen to our elders in the communities, they used to do something very similar to this, and somewhere

along the line we got very litigious in our ways. We got very fixed and rigid, and, quite frankly, Mother Nature doesn't really care about our processes and procedures. If you have the training and the ability to do something, then act.

5:40

So with that, I'm honoured to be able to speak on this motion as well, and I know it will go a long way and it's coming from the right intention. So we've been, you know, hitting a couple of events. We just saw up in Fort McMurray as well last summer that we have more severity, and the issue that's being challenged, not only us but the western states and western provinces, is you can't keep throwing money at it, and you can't train enough people, so to speak, in those conventional areas. What this does is that it allows for that force multiplier to take place. It allows for folks to do something. It allows for a preauthorized, kind of a rolodex, if you would, roster that you could use for that.

If we try to rely on the Canadian Armed Forces, it doesn't make sense. Like, our model is not set up for that. You can't have, you know, the Armed Forces just drop in and fix everything for you. It takes time, and again, this should stop some of those bigger events. Not saying that you don't need the conventional forest firefighting groups. You don't want to push the military away, because they have a skill set that's second to none, but if you don't let it get to that point in time, then it really helps.

I can tell you full well, when you're out there in the middle of the night helping little old seniors move out of their homes to a hall and then moving them down the road further, this goes a long way to satisfying some of that. When you've had individuals that stayed behind to make sure that their properties were safe, when you've had them work with existing fire agencies and the police as well to take care of not only their properties but the adjacent areas, they've literally saved towns. That was something that we got out of this of lessons learned of what could take place there.

Alberta's safety is our top priority. You know, we were talking, and there were some comments made earlier about folks that didn't want to leave their areas, and that too came up in town halls. Part of that is the concern that they would lose property or lose life and limb from their standpoint if it got out of control. The second side of it that we had to address was if you stayed in those homes and those areas and those locations and if you didn't have the training, as an example – and I put it very succinctly in one town hall. If you don't get out when we need you to get out, so if you're not co-ordinated with those elements, I can't deploy or we can't deploy as a province the aerial assets. So I can't come in and flatten a bunch of buildings to knock the fire out if you're sitting inside of it.

By having this integrated approach where folks are educated, they understand the forest fire capabilities and the wildfire capabilities of all of the resources at disposal, then it's more of a force multiplier. They're integrated again into that service. They literally can understand how the bigger operand works, and then the folks from those bigger items or elements will also understand that they have local resources on the ground, boots on the ground.

So an Alberta-made solution reduces the dependency on federal aid. Quite honestly, we've got a big bill out there for the feds. They haven't paid up for a number of years, and we're probably seeing something similar with Jasper, so we have to look at also mitigating some of our impacts, because getting paid back is one of those things that's going to be very difficult for the taxpayer. Again, if you can see something and do something and you have the training for it and the capability, then that's what we'd want to do.

I've got a couple of other points here, too, that it also alleviates the pressures on those, on the firefighting capabilities of them. So the volunteers can handle noncritical tasks. They can handle the

noncritical tasks. The first responders can look at the primary action, so the areas that it's most critical and where they have the capabilities to do so.

Building self-reliance into communities is not a bad thing. Again, this is how we used to do things, and again, looking at jurisdictions in Idaho where the farmers, the roster and the farmers, basically their concern was on federal land, so there was a nuance between the local counties, communities, state-owned land, and then the federal land. What they had seen time and time again was this ambiguity of what would take place on federal lands would then spill over, and they didn't have the ability to do it. So again, they allowed something similar to this training to take place, and they could go out there and actually do something with it.

It boosts the overall preparedness and resilience of the areas. Acting now prepares us to save lives. We were very fortunate that we didn't have a lot more loss out in the Jasper area, and I think there's going to be a ton of lessons learned from that one between the interface of not only provincial but federal capabilities and the local capabilities there. A lot of that could have been prevented, from what we're hearing and looking at those integrations. Federal reports show that, you know, there's more severity. Well, part of that, too, is that we've increased fuel loads. The forests haven't been logged and managed in a number of ways that they used to be.

Again, when we start talking to our U.S. counterparts, they're seeing the same thing down there. Even up north in the territories and in the Arctic we're talking about the same thing. A lot of these big burns that usually took place or control burns didn't happen. So, again, you have high probability for potential of these things to take place, and, again, if you can put them out sooner rather than later, then that would work.

Emergency response involves local, provincial, federal jurisdictions, and then, again, the military should be something of last resort. Experts recommend creating civilian disaster response organizations, and, again, this isn't just our jurisdiction. So what I would like . . .

Mr. Nicolaidis: Would the member give way?

Mr. Getson: Sure.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: My apologies. There are no interventions in private members' business.

Hon. member, you have a minute and a half left.

Mr. Getson: Well, I appreciate that. Every time the minister stands up in private members' business and wants to be participating, I'd give him way any day of the week. So I appreciate the minister's try there.

With that, Madam Speaker, again, coming back to the Member for West Yellowhead's motion, it's very simple. It's very pure of heart, and it gives us the latitude to be able to compel and to utilize a number of folks.

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to consider taking the necessary steps to develop an auxiliary workforce program for local residents, volunteer associations, and landowners to supplement the work of first responders during emergencies and disasters.

Moreover, I would suggest that with that wording it also allows us to be preventative. In the case that we could train a lot of volunteers, local area residents to be able to do that, this would go a very long way to helping prevent, to be able to make sure that folks don't feel powerless or helpless and that they can really complement and help out our existing firefighting services.

With that, I'll end my remarks.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members to join in on the debate on the motion?

Seeing none, I will ask the hon. Member for West Yellowhead to close.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'd like to take the opportunity to thank all the members who took the time to consider and support the motion today and offer some debate. This is a motion of great importance and one that addresses a critical need in our communities, particularly in rural and remote areas where resources are often scarce and disasters can strike unexpectedly.

We've heard compelling arguments from several members about the value this motion holds for individuals who are directly impacted and for the broader community. The central idea behind the motion is simply a profound empowering of local residents to become part of the emergency response infrastructure. It's not just about giving people a role. It's about giving them a chance to contribute when disaster strikes rather than being forced to leave, often at the worst possible moment.

As we've discussed today, rural communities face unique challenges when it comes to disaster response. These are areas where the geography, the landscape, and even the social fabric are deeply tied to the lives of those who call the communities home. By training folks to work with first responders, people who already have an intimate understanding of the land and the needs of their communities, we are not only giving them a chance to make a difference; we are also ensuring that the response to disasters is faster, more effective, and more in tune with the needs of the affected people. These rural residents are often the first to be affected when disaster strikes, and they are also the first to respond in informal capacities.

What this motion proposes is to formalize that response and give these individuals the training, the resources, and the recognition that they deserve. We're talking about people who in times of crisis are willing to step up but who, without proper support, are left to fend for themselves. This motion seeks to change that narrative by giving them the tools they need to help others, to save lives, and to rebuild in the wake of devastation.

It's also crucial to remember that these individuals are not just helping in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. By empowering community-driven first responders, we are investing in long-term resilience. These residents will be better equipped to mitigate the impact of future disasters, protect their families, and maintain the integrity of their communities. In turn, it helps to reduce the strain on our emergency first responders, who can then focus their efforts where they are needed most.

5:50

As we move forward, we must acknowledge the strength and resilience we have in our rural communities. These people are survivors. They have intimate knowledge of their land, their environment, and the needs of their neighbours. In moments of crisis we must look to them not just as those who need assistance but as valuable partners in the response effort.

Madam Speaker, this motion is not just about creating an auxiliary force of first responders. It's about acknowledging the unique strengths of our rural communities, empowering them to be part of the solution when disaster strikes. Let's urge all members to support Motion 516, as it represents not just a plan for disaster response but a path towards stronger, more resilient communities.

Thank you again, Madam Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 516 carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader and Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Well, thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Let me take this opportunity to once again congratulate the hon. Member for West Yellowhead for a job well done.

Madam Speaker, it is a fine Monday evening. I move that the Assembly be adjourned till 1:30 p.m. on Tuesday, November 19, 2024.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:51 p.m.]

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