



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Special Standing Committee
on
Members' Services

Monday, June 14, 2021
10 a.m.

Transcript No. 30-2-4

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Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

Cooper, Hon. Nathan M., Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills (UC), Chair
Ellis, Mike, Calgary-West (UC), Deputy Chair

Dang, Thomas, Edmonton-South (NDP)
Deol, Jasvir, Edmonton-Meadows (NDP)
Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP)
Goodridge, Laila, Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche (UC)
Hoffman, Sarah, Edmonton-Glenora (NDP)*
Long, Martin M., West Yellowhead (UC)
Neudorf, Nathan T., Lethbridge-East (UC)
Renaud, Marie F., St. Albert (NDP)**
Sabir, Irfan, Calgary-McCall (NDP)
Sigurdson, R.J., Highwood (UC)
Williams, Dan D.A., Peace River (UC)

* substitution for Nicole Goehring

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10 a.m.**Monday, June 14, 2021**

[Mr. Cooper in the chair]

The Chair: Well, good morning, hon. members and friends. I would like to call this meeting to order.

My name is Nathan Cooper, and I'm the MLA for the outstanding constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. I will now ask members and those joining the committee at the table to introduce themselves for the record. I will then call upon members joining the meeting remotely to introduce themselves.

I would also wish to note for the record the following substitutions: Ms Renaud for Mr. Deol and Ms Hoffman for Ms Goehring.

Mr. Roth: Good morning. Aaron Roth, committee clerk.

Mr. Ellis: Good morning. Mike Ellis, MLA for Calgary-West.

Mr. Neudorf: Nathan Neudorf, MLA for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Williams: Dan Williams, MLA for Peace River.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

Ms Cherkewich: Teri Cherkewich, Law Clerk.

Ms McHugh: Ruth McHugh, executive director, corporate services.

Ms Dean: Shannon Dean, Clerk.

The Chair: As previously mentioned, I'm Nathan Cooper, the chair of the committee and the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta.

Before we turn to the business at hand, a few operational items. I'd like to remind everyone of the updated committee room protocols that require that outside of individuals with an exemption, those attending the meeting in person must wear a mask at all times unless they're speaking. Based on the recommendations from the chief medical officer of health regarding physical distancing, attendees at today's meeting are reminded to leave the appropriate distance between themselves and others participating in the meeting.

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I would now like to turn to those joining us remotely to please introduce yourselves, beginning with Member Sabir.

Mr. Sabir: Irfan Sabir, MLA for Calgary-McCall.

Ms Hoffman: Sarah Hoffman, Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Sigurdson: R.J. Sigurdson, MLA for Highwood.

Mr. Dang: Good morning. Thomas Dang, Edmonton-South.

Mr. Long: Martin Long, MLA, West Yellowhead.

Ms Goodridge: Laila Goodridge, Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche.

The Chair: Are there others? Excellent. Thank you all very much.

This brings us to agenda item 2, approval of the agenda. Are there any proposed additions, revisions for today's meeting? If not, would a member move to adopt the agenda?

Mr. Neudorf: So moved.

The Chair: Member Neudorf. Is there any discussion?

Hearing and seeing none, all those in favour of adopting the agenda as proposed by the hon. Nathan Neudorf, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. Remotely, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. The motion is carried and so ordered.

Point 3, the approval of the meeting minutes. Are there any amendments to the minutes of our last committee meeting, additions, or revisions? If not, would a member please move the approval of the minutes? Member Ellis. Any discussion on the motion?

Hearing and seeing none, all those in favour of approving the minutes from our previous meeting of January 20, 2021, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. Joining us remotely, in favour? Opposed? The motion is carried and so ordered.

Members, item 4 on your agenda is the subcommittee review of the expenditure guidelines and the Members' Services Committee orders. You should have a final copy of the report to review the expenditure guidelines and the MSC orders, which was distributed on May 7, 2021. I would like to ask Mr. Ellis as the chair of the subcommittee to speak to this item of business.

Mr. Ellis: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As you are aware, a subcommittee was struck in November 2020 to review the Members' Services Committee orders, the members' expenditure guidelines, and the caucus expenditure guidelines. In January of this year we issued an interim report to the committee which recommended an amendment to the constituency service orders pertaining to members' communications, which was agreed to by this committee. Since issuing its interim report, the subcommittee met regularly to complete its mandate, and its final report was distributed on May 7.

In the report the subcommittee recommends changes to the caucus expenditure guidelines and has included a revised caucus expenditure guidelines document for consideration. Included in the revised document is, number one, clarifying language around the distinction between caucus-related events, business, and activities from those of government and constituency events, business, and activities in relation to the expenditure of funds; number two, a provision that a value-for-money consideration be made by caucus expenditure officers prior to approving an expense; number three, clarifications in relation to the transfer of constituency office communications and promotional funds to caucuses for research and administration; and, number four, finally, the document clarifies that cannabis, like alcohol, is not an eligible expense.

I would like to personally thank the members of the subcommittee – colleagues Member Dang, Member Goehring, Member Williams, Member Neudorf, Member Goodridge, and substitute member Mr. Sigurdson – just for all of their hard work and their contributions to the subcommittee. I'd like to thank the LAO for supporting the work of the subcommittee throughout its mandate.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Chair: Thank you, Member Ellis. I, too, appreciate the work of the subcommittee and thank you for the reports, both the interim report in January and this additional report now. I know that there were a number of meetings and some extensive work that took place, and I appreciate and value the efforts of all.

Are there others who would like to provide any comments about the report or further discussion? If not – or perhaps even so. Member Dang, I see that your hand is raised. Perhaps you might provide some comments. I noticed that you had provided a motion in advance. I would be happy to hear that motion as well if you are so inclined.

Mr. Dang: Sure. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess at this point I have a couple of clarifying questions maybe just on implementation of this report. Perhaps if I could ask our colleagues in the LAO here before we move any motions. Is that all right?

The Chair: Yeah. Please proceed.

Mr. Dang: Sure. With your indulgence, I know that we typically only have one question and a follow-up, but I only have three questions, so maybe I can go through them very quickly. I don't think they'll be lengthy at all. For my first question: on page 9 of the updated guidelines it states that caucuses and constituency offices cannot cohost events. In the past, obviously, caucus events including – for example, the NDP caucus hosted Black History Month, which was held by MLA Shepherd as part of the caucus as a cohost. My understanding is that events like the Black History Month that were done are still permitted, and it's not the intent of the updated guidelines to prevent events like that from moving forward. Is that correct?

Ms McHugh: Yeah. I would say that that's correct, Member Dang. What we talked about was the separation of the budgets. Every budget that is approved, throughout the entire GOA entity, has a specific purpose, and it's important that funds allocated to that budget be used for that specific purpose. So long as the budget funds are being used for the purpose of the budget they were intended, that's just fine. Does that clarify it, do you think?

Mr. Dang: Yeah. I think that's good. Thank you.

Ms McHugh: Okay. Perfect. Thank you.

10:10

Mr. Dang: The next point I had was on page 5 of the new guidelines. It states that "the intent and purpose of caucus activities must be clearly distinguishable from government consultation or official government business and from constituency business." Obviously, I think we had quite a lengthy discussion about this in the subcommittee. My understanding, of course, is that you couldn't host a town hall with the minister in terms of having the minister collect information for the minister. What you could do is that you could host a town hall that you invited the minister to and have your own event which the minister was a guest at. Is that correct?

Ms McHugh: Yeah. That's absolutely correct. Again, it's the same spirit of what we talked about before, that the purpose of the budget needs to be honoured. If a member is hosting an event with his or her constituents, that's the purpose. It's not for a government purpose. But, of course, you can invite a minister to join you and speak as a guest. So, yeah, you're right.

Mr. Dang: Finally, just with the indulgence of the committee – thank you. With the meaning of sponsorship that was listed in the new guidelines and how, obviously, caucuses and constituencies cannot sponsor events, just to clarify: for example, at many Stampede events if you purchase a spot for a tent to attend, that may appear on a receipt as a sponsorship, but it's not intended in that manner. I guess that would still be permitted as well, right?

Ms McHugh: Yeah. You're exactly right.

Mr. Dang: Perfect. Awesome. Well, thank you so much.

I want to thank the LAO for their work on this. I know it's been a long few months here. I'd like to thank the government caucus as well for working with us on some of these issues.

The Chair: I'm not sure. Do you want to move your motion at the present time, Dang?

Mr. Dang: I can wait to hear from more colleagues.

The Chair: Okay.
Member Williams.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Chair. I, too, with the chair's permission, will just ask maybe one or two questions to follow up.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Mr. Williams: I want to start by thanking the LAO and the committee members for the work we did. I found it very collaborative and a very good working environment in the subcommittee. I appreciate that collaboration. As I know, our colleagues in the Legislature want to see that we get this right.

With that, I'll maybe pick up on a question that Member Dang was asking. On page 4 of the expenditure guidelines document, purpose of a budget, we addressed that question of: expenses must fit within the purpose of these different budgets that come to different departments within government. This page, really, is quite important, with the "purpose of a caucus budget" and then these four bullet points. I imagine we should see that as sort of framing the entire document. Would that be fair?

Ms McHugh: Yes. Exactly.

Mr. Williams: Okay. I think that largely these remain very similar, changing of some syntax but semantics remain the same. It would really be that last bullet point, the fourth one, that I want to clarify: "communication of the caucus' policy positions or proposals to Albertans." That allows quite a broad breadth of communication from caucuses and what they deem are their proposals, what are their initiatives, understanding that it must come from their budget and it must be communicated by them, but it is up to the caucuses to decide what the proposals are.

Ms McHugh: That's exactly correct. Yeah.

Mr. Williams: Okay. So that discretion lies exclusively in the hands of the caucuses?

Ms McHugh: It does.

Mr. Williams: Okay.

If I may, Chair, another section. I'll just ask quickly, and I'll leave it open to my colleagues if they have another follow-up on it. Looking at page 5 of the document, surrounding this question of "the intent and purpose of caucus activities must be clearly distinguishable from government consultation or official government business and from constituency business," this, again, speaks to those different buckets as long as they're distinguishable, but obviously there'll be overlap in content at times between these. What would be important in your mind would be that it's communicated by caucus and that it's not official government business or consultation on behalf of the government, which I would understand are fairly narrow in scope?

Ms McHugh: Yeah. You're exactly right. Sometimes the position that caucus is advocating for might be the same as the position a member or a government is advocating for. But as long as it is the caucus sharing their view, their perspective on their position or policy, then yes, it's allowed within their budget because they have an allocation for communication within their budget.

Mr. Williams: Okay. I have other questions. Maybe I'll offer to the chair if he knows of any other members wishing to ask questions.

The Chair: At present I don't have anyone else on my list – oh, Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just one quick question. The addition of: it is the caucus expenditure officer's exclusive responsibility to consider the value of the money. Just to confirm that that line designates that it is solely up to that expenditure officer to determine whether value for money has been considered, not the LAO. Is that correct?

Ms McHugh: Yes. You're exactly correct. It is the expenditure officer's sole authority to determine that value for money has been considered when they have approved the expenditure.

Mr. Neudorf: Wonderful. Thank you.
That's my only question, Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Ellis.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you. I know Mr. Dang and Mr. Williams had asked some questions regarding the Stampede, so it kind of got me thinking here. I just want to make sure, I guess, that we understand this correctly throughout the province but specifically for me in Calgary. When an event is being held, maybe a Stampede breakfast or something along those lines, and a minister is invited, as an example, I just want to confirm that that doesn't necessarily make it a government event. Is that correct?

Ms McHugh: Yeah. You're exactly right.

What I think we just want to keep in mind is the fact of that separation of those budgets. It should be, you know, readily apparent that this is a caucus event and not a government event.

Mr. Ellis: Right.
Just a follow-up if I could, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yeah.

Mr. Ellis: Just to follow up really quickly, Mr. Chair, if the UCP caucus was holding an event or the NDP caucus was holding an event – and let's say that it happens to be in Stampede, for example – there still is a separation, we'll call it, between the member and caucus. For example, as a Calgary member – and it's a caucus-paid event – I couldn't have a Mike Ellis tent. I just want to clarify that. Or could I?

Ms McHugh: Right. I think that's right, Member Ellis, because that, I think, could cause some confusion.

Mr. Ellis: Yeah. I just wanted to be clear on that for the record.
Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Member Williams.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Chair. I just have two more quick areas of follow-up if that's all right. They're going back to page 5 at the top, the single bullet point under the first line: "expenses incurred in relation to a function of a political party or partisan activity." Is this an exhaustive list of expenses that are not eligible for reimbursement from a caucus budget?

Ms McHugh: I don't believe any of the lists in the guideline would be considered exhaustive. It is a guideline, and things change, and times change, especially if we waited a while before updating it

again. I don't think any of the lists are intended to be exhaustive, Member Williams, but they are intended to be a good guideline to give the expenditure officers using this guideline sufficient guidance so that they know if they're in the general direction.

Mr. Williams: Sure. Maybe one follow-up on that question. As things change and times change, would it be that the LAO, then, gets to decide what more content would be included in this and what would be expanded past this list if it's not exhaustive?

Ms Dean: I think that if there was any uncertainty, the LAO would bring it to this committee for consideration.

Mr. Williams: Okay. I appreciate that follow-up.

My last area of follow-up would be on pages 6 through 9 of the document under the caucus operations chart. There's a section in the column on the right that says: supplemental information for eligible expenses. Are these lists exhaustive, or are they sort of guidelines within guidelines to help inform?

Ms McHugh: It's exactly what you just said: guidelines within guidelines to help inform just so that you know if you're sort of directionally correct in what you're about to approve.

10:20

Mr. Williams: Okay. Well, I appreciate that. At this time I do not have any further follow-up unless members of my team want to add something.

The Chair: Member Hoffman, followed by Member Neudorf.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the opportunity to ask so many detailed questions. One of the answers confused me based on prior discussion, so I'm just hoping to get further clarity. It was my understanding that government and caucuses or government and private members can cohost things together, but I was under the impression that caucuses and private members who are part of that caucus could cohost things together. If, for example, Mr. Ellis and other Calgary-based MLAs wanted to do a joint Calgary initiative, the UCP caucus and those Calgary-based MLAs could cohost and therefore have their tents at these events together as long as they were private members. Am I wrong in that interpretation?

Ms McHugh: No. I think you are wrong in that interpretation. A caucus budget and members' budgets are for two different purposes, so they cannot cohost. Now, that being said, there is a method by which members can transfer funds to a caucus. If a member wanted to help cost share an event with caucus, there is an existing method for members to transfer funds to caucus, but cohosting an event between caucus and members would not be allowed. Members cohosting events together, however, is allowed. Let's say that three Calgary members wanted to host a breakfast together at the Stampede. That's okay because members' budgets have a purpose, and that purpose is to interact with their constituents. If the three of them are interacting with their constituents together, that's okay.

Ms Hoffman: But their caucus expenditure officers couldn't say, "This also meets a caucus objective" and therefore help cover some of the costs for that event if they wanted to split it four ways, for example? Like, even if I've transferred money to the caucus budget and part of it was to support some of these larger events for other MLAs, for my colleagues, we wouldn't be able to do that unless it was deemed a caucus event, not a Member Sabir event?

Ms McHugh: Sorry. I just want to make sure that I'm clear on your question. Members and caucuses cannot cohost events. Those two budgets are for very separate purposes. You cannot cohost an event. Members together can cohost an event, and if a member wants to help fund a caucus event, there is a facility for members to transfer funds to caucus in order to help defray those costs.

Ms Hoffman: I understand that. But they can't have their tent, for example, there to show that they have been part of organizing that event. You're saying that they would have to do that out of the goodness of their heart without being seen as being one of the cohosts?

Mr. Williams: If I could just add a clarifying question to Member Hoffman's point. When it comes to cohosting, it really is a question of what you spend the dollars themselves on. If tents are there, if people are present, then it's not a question, but it could be that a caucus could spend money on a breakfast. Individual members could bring their tents. They could bring themselves, their crowds, that kind of thing. If you're splitting the cost of the pancake breakfast, the actual sausage and eggs, that kind of thing, that would be cohosting. Were you to have people present, were things to be brought from a separate budget, they're separate. It's the actual splitting of the cost of the event, bills, related costs. Is that correct?

Ms McHugh: You're right.

Mr. Williams: I'm not sure if that helped Member Hoffman or not. I know it was a question within our caucus as well. Sorry to interrupt.

Ms McHugh: That's a good clarification.
Does that help, Member Hoffman?

Ms Hoffman: I guess my goal, if a caucus is doing an event, is that you be able to be seen as part of that caucus being part of that event, and I think I've heard that you can't have your tent at a caucus event, for example, because you're an individual MLA even though you happen to be a member of that caucus.

Ms McHugh: You can attend that event and be perceived as part of that caucus. The concern is with the funding of the event. A member's budget is designed for a member to work with their constituents. A caucus budget is designed for all of those purposes that are stated in the caucus expenditure guidelines. They're separate purposes, so you must keep the funding separate.

Ms Hoffman: That's great. I'm totally fine with that.

To the question that Mr. Ellis asked about, "Would he be able to have his tent present?" the answer was no. I'm trying to understand: what piece in the guidelines says that you can't provide shade that has your name on it, for example? Could other outside agencies have their tents there and provide shade if they weren't individual MLAs? Like, could Re/Max have their tent there? How is that different than an individual MLA? I'm just wondering where in the guidelines it says that you can't have any branding, that type of thing.

Ms McHugh: It's not a question of branding; it's a question of funding. If a caucus is hosting an event and Member Ellis has a tent right beside that event, that's fine. If Re/Max has a tent right beside that event, that's fine. Member Ellis is paying for a tent and having a tent, and it happens to be located near the caucus. We just need to be careful of the perception of cohosting, which is not allowed because that's a merging of budgets. That's all.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much.

Ms McHugh: Okay.

The Chair: Member Neudorf, followed by Member Sabir.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Chair. I just want to clarify on page 9. If a caucus were to contact financial management and inquire about the eligibility of an expense prior to that expense occurring, once that decision was made, that's relatively final, and the decision is not really appealable or changeable once it has been presented. That's kind of the authority on that, right? There's no higher authority for answering that question?

Ms McHugh: There's always a higher – sorry. Go ahead.

The Chair: Sorry.

There are lots of appeal processes that come to the Speaker and ultimately to this committee for a final appeal should that ever be necessary.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Chair. I probably overly confused the question. I didn't mean to infer that there wasn't an appeal. I just wanted to make sure that there is a preapproval process, and if that is used, that should be consistent and trusted as opposed to continually being appealed so that we don't have multiple meetings of Members' Services to decide which expenses are eligible. Is that correct?

Ms McHugh: You're exactly right, yeah.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you.

The Chair: Member Sabir.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A couple of questions. One is: for instance, if I'm hosting an event at the Genesis Centre, which is in my riding, and the purpose of that is to hear from my constituents – and my caucus has a vested interest to hear from those constituents as well – is it possible that I pay for rent and everything and use the caucus mic and their equipment? Would that be considered cohosting?

Ms McHugh: I'm not sure that if you borrow equipment from someone, that would be considered cohosting. I'm not really sure. I guess we would need to look at the specifics. I think what we want to be keeping in mind at this level is the spirit of the intention of keeping those budgets separate. They were allocated for separate purposes, so we need to keep the budgets separate. I guess I'm just not sure on the specifics of if you borrowed something from someone.

Mr. Sabir: Even if it's not borrowing? For instance, I'm paying for the rent; they are paying for all other equipment, for refreshments.

Ms McHugh: It feels like cohosting.

Mr. Sabir: That's offside?

Ms McHugh: Yeah, that's offside. You can't cohost events.

Mr. Sabir: The second question. The same: if the Genesis Centre is hosting a Stampede breakfast, which is in my riding – and oftentimes many organizations do pay them or sponsor their event and get a tent place – will I be able to do that and sponsor that event so that I can get a place to put my tent there and meet my constituents for outreach purposes?

10:30

Ms McHugh: We did have that question earlier, and sponsorship is not allowed. You can't use taxpayer dollars to sponsor organizations. It's just not allowed. But sometimes the wording of an invoice is such that the event organizer uses the word "sponsoring," but really what you're doing is paying to rent space. That's okay. The spirit of that is okay. We know that you're paying to rent space even though they might use the word "sponsor" in their invoice. It's the spirit of the intent, and you're not intending to sponsor them; you're intending to buy space.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. I got that. But oftentimes they're the lead organizers, and essentially we pay them to rent the space, to put a tent there so that we can do outreach. But I'm a bit concerned about the previous one, where I guess it's possible that caucus is doing some event or wants to do some event in my riding and they're going to do outreach and I have the same interest and I do have a budget – communication budget, outreach budget – and I'm not able to join with them even though the event is held in my riding because it will be considered cohosting. I think that it's too rigid and strict.

The Chair: Okay.

Are there any other questions? Member Dang.

Mr. Dang: Chair, I don't think I have any other questions. I'm happy to hear any motions that other people might have, though.

The Chair: You'd submitted a motion. Can you move it?

Mr. Dang: Sure. I would move – I don't have the exact wording in front of me, but I believe it's something to the effect of: that we approve and implement the draft revised caucus expenditures as recommended in section 3.1 et cetera, et cetera.

Maybe you could help me out there, Mr. Speaker.

The Chair: Yeah. It's on the screen, and Aaron, the acting committee clerk, will read it into the record momentarily.

Mr. Roth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Moved by Mr. Dang that the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services accept the May 2021 report and recommendation of the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services subcommittee to approve and implement the draft caucus expenditure guidelines.

The Chair: Are there further questions, comments, additions, discussion?

Seeing and hearing none, I am prepared to call the question. Hon. members, on the motion as proposed by Member Dang, all those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. Joining us remotely, in favour, please say aye. Opposed, please say no.

The motion is carried and so ordered.

This brings us to item 5 on our agenda. It is the crossjurisdictional research in relation to expensing American sign language interpretation. At our last meeting we requested crossjurisdictional research relating to expensing ASL interpretative services. Before I open the floor to discussion, I'd like to first ask Ms McHugh to provide some further detailed information and a bit of an overview on the research document that was circulated.

Ms McHugh: Thank you. Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The crossjurisdictional research was provided to the committee members in the briefing materials re interpretative, captioning, and American sign language services. I'm sure you've all had a chance to read it. I won't go into it in detail, but I'll just give you an overview. The LAO has always considered the costs of communication services to

accommodate hearing-impaired constituents to be in the same category as any other cost related to conducting a group or individual meeting for constituency business; that is, this is a legitimate cost, the MSA budget is designed to cover it, and we encourage members to use it.

Our crossjurisdictional research indicates that this approach is in alignment with all the other Canadian jurisdictions. Of the provinces who responded to our survey, the House of Commons, the Senate, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec all allow members to charge the costs pertaining to the translation of various communications, including costs pertaining to interpretive, captioning, and ASL services, to their members' office budgets. That's the equivalent to the MSA here in Alberta. British Columbia indicated that while they've not encountered such a request to date, services of that nature required to undertake constituency duties would likely be covered from the constituency office allowance.

To summarize, interpretive and captioning services are eligible expenses to be paid from a member's services allowance if the expenses are in support of a member's communication with constituents as set out in section 5 of the Constituency Services Order. Some examples of that would be interpretive and captioning services for an event hosted by the member for the member's constituents such as a town hall meeting; services required for other types of meetings with the member and member's constituents; and interpretive and captioning services related to other forms of communication between the member and their constituents such as social media or video footage. It can include prerecorded, live messaging, et cetera.

I hope that's a sufficient recap, Mr. Speaker, but I sure am happy to take questions if anyone has them.

The Chair: I have a list that I have started. I have Member Dang on that list, Member Renaud as well. Anyone else to start? Okay. Go ahead, Thomas.

Mr. Dang: Sure. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for the report. I think that certainly we appreciate the work that's been done on this so far by the LAO. I think it's still going to be important that we have some sort of interpretive services allowance for use by members and their caucuses. I think that certainly my colleagues will have a lot to speak to about that very shortly.

But at this time I'd like to move a motion, that

the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services direct the Legislative Assembly Office to prepare a draft order that would create an interpretive services allowance for use by members and their caucuses, along with budget options, for consideration by the committee at a subsequent meeting.

The Chair: Excellent. Sorry, Thomas. Was that the actual motion? Did you just read the actual motion into the record? Or did you . . .

Mr. Dang: I believe I did.

The Chair: Okay. Excellent. We will accept that as though you have. The committee clerk is just in the process of circulating that as well although it has been prepared in advance. Did you have additional comments, or shall I proceed to Ms Renaud?

Mr. Dang: I'm okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Member Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. Obviously, you know, the government – we've had an alternative communication policy since '94. That was recommended at the time by the Premier's Council on the Status of

Persons with Disabilities. Part of the concern is that I don't feel like it has kept up with the demand and the need. Although I do agree that we can be reimbursed for expenses for ASL, I also don't believe it captures the cost of other services. When we talk about alternative communication, it's not just ASL. That may include creating large print. That may include an actual person that translates using plain language. There are a number of other things that are involved. Although we focus on ASL because it is quite visible, I don't feel like we've kept up.

I think that if we were to look at all 87 constituencies around Alberta, there are probably very few that actively engage in alternative communication. I think that instead of responding to a request for it, it's incumbent on us to reduce those barriers by ensuring that all communication with our constituents as well as government is automatically as barrier free as humanly possible. I don't believe that, at the time, the budget that was created is reflective of that attitude. I'm just wondering if you could speak to that.

Ms McHugh: Am I understanding the question properly, that we all agree that communication and all of the forms of communication that you talked about – barrier-free communication is absolutely contemplated in the MSA budget. It is allowed for. It's encouraged. Are you saying that there's not enough money in the budget?

10:40

Ms Renaud: Correct.

Ms McHugh: What you're actually saying, then, is that the members' services allowance needs to be increased in order to accommodate this. Is that what you're . . .

Ms Renaud: Yes. I mean, I would put it back to the 87 offices: what is it that has been the barrier for those constituencies not to offer barrier-free communication? Is it the fact that they didn't check if people required it or they didn't have the capacity within their budget to? I know I can only speak to my budget, that it eats up, you know, a significant portion of it and it doesn't allow me to go as far as I know that I need to in terms of communication.

The Chair: Member Williams is also on the list. Dan.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate the initiative brought forward. I will just begin by saying that I want to make sure that my constituents and every member's constituents have free, open, and barrierless communication. I realize we have to do that within restricted and limited resources. That's just a function of being in a world where we have a limited budget, so we have to make sure that we balance that appropriately.

I think that the best thing we can do is provide maximum flexibility for individual members to be able to communicate. Members of my own constituency, constituents, will have lots of different interpretive needs with a number of different languages, from Tagalog to Dene and many others in between. Of course, there are the ASL community and others that are important that we communicate with. I appreciate the input from members opposite who say that they want to make sure that we can communicate with our constituents. I feel the same, but it's for that reason that I think the best thing we do is empower that flexibility within the members' services communication orders so that those orders are free and able to use those dollars to that end. We have a budget for this.

Perhaps members opposite suggest that we should look at increasing the communication budget in the MSA. Of course, that's their prerogative. I'm not sure that this motion achieves what I think is the best flexibility to achieve best communication with Albertans

through our constituency offices. That would be my thought on it. But, of course, open for discussion. I think it's important that we communicate as freely and openly as possible.

The Chair: Member Hoffman, followed by Ms Renaud again.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. Thank you very much for the information that's been shared so far. One of the things I want to point out is that the House of Commons does actually have real-time ASL translation for the proceedings of the Assembly, and that's something that's definitely different from Alberta. There might be individual MLAs who access their own expense accounts for one-on-one communication, but there's generally ASL available when members are speaking in venues such as the one we're in right now.

Knowing that this isn't available, I have to say that protecting and creating space for disabled Albertans to be a part of democracy, I think, shouldn't be something that is up to individual choice for MLAs. I think it should be something that's universally accessible for all Albertans. I don't believe that what we're doing right now is sufficient, and I've heard this from many stakeholders, which is why we brought this forward seven months ago. I know that many of them are very frustrated that it's taken seven months since this was first raised at this table for it to come back.

I have to say that I think that having additional resources is fine for individual MLAs to make individual choices, but I do think it's important that we move forward with a collective intent that we are going to make sure that we remove barriers for citizens to be engaged in democracy, which includes, of course – we're thinking about it right now because we don't have any deaf, hard of hearing, or autistic MLAs that I'm aware of who rely on sign language to communicate. But this isn't just about us receiving information for our constituents; it's about creating space for constituents to seek office who have disabilities as well or if any of us acquires a disability while we're on the job and needs interpretive services. It definitely works both ways.

But I do want to reiterate that the House of Commons has real-time sign language interpretation. We do not. I think it is something that – I know we're highlighting sort of one-off engagements with constituents or meetings held by individual MLAs or caucuses, but I think one of the things I've really appreciated and a lot of members of the deaf and hard of hearing community have appreciated is the fact that ASL has been incorporated into the regular updates around COVID. I think that speaks to the fact that sharing information between government and government officials and the public is so important and that we remove barriers.

We have an opportunity here today, through this proposed amendment, to not just increase communication but to take down a barrier for a protected group, a group that has for far too long had their human rights negatively impacted. We have an opportunity to uphold those human rights and to enable that, that we can communicate with the deaf, hard of hearing, or those who rely on ASL, who are autistic. I'm sure there are probably others as well. Those are just some of the individuals who are top of mind because they have raised this issue with myself, with Member Renaud, and, I imagine, with others. I do think that this is a different priority than other types of translation services.

The Chair: Thank you, Member Hoffman.

I just have two quick points to add to this. We at the Legislative Assembly Office are currently in the process of undertaking steps to expand ASL translation. I know that Ms Renaud and others will know that for the PAC committee a number of weeks ago for Community and Social Services, we trialled ASL translation at the

committee level for the first time, and we endeavour to expand some of that opportunity for committees over the next little while.

While the House of Commons does have translation or ASL services for the House proceedings, no other jurisdiction has permanent translation for committee proceedings although it is occasionally done on a case-by-case basis for specific witnesses or that sort of thing. We are looking at the possibility of having our committee translated with ASL interpretation going forward, so I think that there are areas that are currently being undertaken with respect to ASL translation and removing some of those barriers.

On the list I have Ms Renaud, followed by Mr. Williams.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. I just wanted to comment that that was wonderful, actually, to have ASL at a committee meeting, but I think, you know, what we're trying to do is keep the door open, not just open it when we get a request, just like we wouldn't put up a ramp when we know there's a visitor coming that has a wheelchair; we would have a permanent ramp to open the doors. I think that was the intent originally of the policy in 1994. It looks like, if you look at the last – I don't know – even decade, we have not done a great job with the tools that we have to just make accessible communication the norm as opposed to based on request, so I do think that we have some changes to make. It was a very good example of that. I think, sadly, the original request got kicked down the road. Many months have gone by. I think it's been seven.

We saw the government doing a fairly good job about consistently having ASL, for example, yet in one of the important press conferences about reopening and the different stages, ASL was missing. I think that that is what we are trying to avoid by having consistency in all constituencies and caucus and in government, that accessible communication is the norm, not the exception. I think that in order to do that, we have to take a look at the way that we are supporting those activities. You know, I think one of the comments somebody made earlier was about the importance of keeping budgets separate. I believe that. I think that that's how you measure progress, by looking at the investment, the barriers you're reducing, and the outcome.

Those are my comments.

The Chair: Member Williams.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Chair. Realizing that we're approaching the 11 o'clock hour, I'll try to keep my comments short. I appreciate, again, the interest and the initiative from the members opposite. I think that in many ways we want to achieve the same goal, which is communication that is free and without barrier to our constituents. Of course, as it oftentimes is in these sorts of settings, we might have different means in trying to achieve it, but I think that at least we know that we have a common goal, and we care about all Albertans in whatever means they communicate.

10:50

The truth is that minority language rights are important in my constituency for a variety of different communities, in all of which I would not say that their rights are being infringed because I provide that translation as needed, as it comes up in my constituency. I'd say that I'm serving those needs as best I can. I think that's a fair way to put it. Every one of us is going to have our own set of needs in our own constituency that we are responsible for being attuned to, and I think it is incumbent on all of us to achieve that end.

I also note that this is about the members' services communication orders. We cannot translate government announcements with any of this. We cannot translate within the Chamber with this. I think that that needs to be pointed out. I understand some members here

are very passionate about the issue but not on this committee regularly, so it's valuable to note that this would really just affect the question of the MSA funding and the communication in our constituencies with this order.

I think, with that, I'll leave my comments there. Of course, I'll be supporting continued communication with my constituents, but I don't believe this motion is the way for us to do that.

The Chair: Member Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks for raising the fact that we've demonstrated some leadership in the committees. I think that that's a good step, and I think that's the right thing, and this is one of the reasons why I don't think an interjurisdictional comparison within Canada serves us well in making the decision about how we want to do our work moving forward. I appreciate that maybe not everyone cares to the same degree or is working to the same degree to ensure that disabled Albertans are democratically engaged, but if this is something that we've demonstrated we're willing to do in committee, that's good. That's a positive step. I think that takes us on the right path, and I think it shows that we're working to make sure that we remove barriers.

I do want to say that, as best we can, it is up to this committee, it is up to the members how we allocate our resources. As best we can, I think we owe it to people who are disabled, who already struggle to find ways to be incorporated into society and regularly have to advocate for themselves, to say: "You don't need to. We're going to make this the standard. We're going to make this the norm because you are part of Alberta, and disability, of course, is a protected grounds against discrimination." I think we have an opportunity to live that value by supporting the motion as brought forward with the amendment from Member Dang.

Thank you.

The Chair: Are there others? Mr. Ellis.

Mr. Ellis: This is to the LAO. Thank you. I just want to be clear. MLAs, caucuses: they do have the ability to pay for interpretive services out of their budget. Is that correct?

Ms McHugh: That's absolutely correct.

Mr. Ellis: Okay. Sorry. A follow-up, if I could, Mr. Chair. Are you aware of at any point – and I know many of you have been in some of your positions certainly for many years and many governments. Are you aware of anyone of any disability that has been denied or in any way struggled so that the LAO or members, MLAs, caucuses have not been able to, I guess, assist them, whether it be in translations or being able to understand what messaging is coming out from a particular party or government or whatever the case may be?

Ms Dean: I'll take that question, because I think I'm the long-timer here. No, we are not aware of any situations where there's been a difficulty in terms of accommodating those types of needs or requests.

Ms Renaud: I'll just add one comment to that question and answer. It is likely a very small percentage of Albertans who are engaged in the daily goings-on of government and all of that work. That's the issue with reducing and eliminating barriers, that you make that pool larger. I just wanted to add those comments.

Thank you.

The Chair: Are there others?

Ms Hoffman: Sorry, Mr. Speaker. If possible?

The Chair: Proceed.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you. I know that members of the deaf and hard of hearing community have said: we would like to have it possible so that all of your Facebook Live events have direct, real-time translation services, ASL services. Of course, what is being said about to the best of our abilities: within our current budgets that's just not possible right now. I haven't even tried to submit for expense approval, because I know that that's not something that we have the capacity to do under the current structure that we have in place. That's one example, but absolutely there are many people who would like us to be more accessible.

The Chair: Are there others?

Seeing none, on the amendment as proposed by the hon. Member Thomas Dang, all those – sorry. On the motion as proposed by the member, all those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. Remotely, please say aye. Opposed, please say no.

Mr. Sabir: Mr. Speaker, can we please record the vote?

The Chair: Sure.

Let's do it internally. I'll call your name. Please indicate for or against.

Member Ellis.

Mr. Ellis: Against.

The Chair: Member Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Opposed.

The Chair: Member Williams.

Mr. Williams: Opposed.

The Chair: Member Renaud.

Ms Renaud: In favour.

The Chair: Member Long.

Mr. Long: Opposed.

The Chair: Member Sabir.

Mr. Sabir: In favour.

The Chair: Member Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: In favour.

The Chair: Member Sigurdson.

Mr. Sigurdson: Opposed.

The Chair: Member Goodridge.

Ms Goodridge: Opposed.

The Chair: Are there others?

Aaron.

Mr. Roth: Mr. Speaker, total for the motion, three; total against, six.

The Chair:

That motion is defeated.

Hon. members, is there other business?

Seeing and hearing none, the date of the next meeting will be at the call of the chair.

Hon. Member Williams to propose adjournment, please.

Mr. Williams: I propose that we adjourn.

The Chair: Hon. members, having heard the motion as proposed by Member Williams, all those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. Remotely in favour, please say aye. Opposed, please say no. That motion is carried and so ordered. We are adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:57 a.m.]

