



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Third Session

Standing Committee
on
Public Accounts

Municipal Affairs

Tuesday, April 19, 2022
8 a.m.

Transcript No. 30-3-3

**Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature
Third Session**

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Phillips, Shannon, Lethbridge-West (NDP), Chair
Reid, Roger W., Livingstone-Macleod (UC), Deputy Chair
Armstrong-Homeniuk, Jackie, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UC)
Hunter, Grant R., Taber-Warner (UC)*
Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC)
Pancholi, Rakhi, Edmonton-Whitemud (NDP)
Renaud, Marie F., St. Albert (NDP)
Rowswell, Garth, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright (UC)
Schmidt, Marlin, Edmonton-Gold Bar (NDP)
Singh, Peter, Calgary-East (UC)
Toor, Devinder, Calgary-Falconridge (UC)
Turton, Searle, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain (UC)
Walker, Jordan, Sherwood Park (UC)

* substitution for Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk

Also in Attendance

Loewen, Todd, Central Peace-Notley (Ind)

Office of the Auditor General Participants

W. Doug Wylie	Auditor General
Michelle Fleming	Principal
Patty Hayes	Assistant Auditor General
Brad Ireland	Assistant Auditor General

Support Staff

Shannon Dean, QC	Clerk
Teri Cherkewich	Law Clerk
Trafton Koenig	Senior Parliamentary Counsel
Philip Massolin	Clerk Assistant and Director of House Services
Nancy Robert	Clerk of <i>Journals</i> and Committees
Sarah Amato	Research Officer
Melanie Niemi-Bohun	Research Officer
Warren Huffman	Committee Clerk
Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
Aaron Roth	Committee Clerk
Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications
Janet Laurie	Supervisor of Corporate Communications
Jeanette Dotimas	Communications Consultant
Michael Nguyen	Communications Consultant
Tracey Sales	Communications Consultant
Janet Schwegel	Director of Parliamentary Programs
Amanda LeBlanc	Deputy Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Participants

Ministry of Municipal Affairs

Dan Balderston, Executive Director and Senior Financial Officer, Financial Services

Brandy Cox, Deputy Minister

Andrew Horton, Executive Director, Municipal Policy and Engagement

Stephen Lacroix, Managing Director, Alberta Emergency Management Agency

Janice Romanyshyn, Executive Director, Grants and Education Property Tax

8 a.m.

Tuesday, April 19, 2022

[Ms Phillips in the chair]

The Chair: All right. Good morning, everyone. I'd like to call this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee to order.

Welcome, everyone in attendance. My name is Shannon Phillips. I'm the MLA for Lethbridge-West and the chair of this committee. As we begin this morning, I'll invite those participating in the committee room, to start off with, to introduce themselves.

Mr. Reid: Thank you. Good morning. Roger Reid, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod and deputy chair of the committee.

Mr. Rowswell: Garth Rowswell, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Mr. Turton: Good morning. Searle Turton, MLA for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Mr. Walker: Good morning. Jordan Walker, MLA, Sherwood Park.

Mr. Singh: Good morning, everyone. Peter Singh, MLA, Calgary-East.

Ms Lovely: Good morning, everyone. Jackie Lovely, Camrose constituency.

Mr. Toor: Good morning. MLA Devinder Toor, Calgary-Falconridge.

Ms Romanyshyn: Good morning. Janice Romanyshyn, executive director of grants and education tax with the department.

Mr. Horton: Good morning. Andrew Horton, executive director of municipal policy and engagement with Municipal Affairs.

Ms Cox: Good morning, everyone. Brandy Cox, deputy minister.

Mr. Balderston: Good morning. Dan Balderston, executive director, financial services.

Mr. Lacroix: Good morning, everybody. Steve Lacroix, managing director of the Alberta Emergency Management Agency.

Mr. Wylie: Good morning. Doug Wylie, Auditor General.

Ms Hayes: Good morning. Patty Hayes, Assistant Auditor General.

Mr. Schmidt: Marlin Schmidt, Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

Ms Pancholi: Good morning. Rahki Pancholi, MLA, Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Robert: Good morning. Nancy Robert, clerk of *Journals* and committees.

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

The Chair: We do have some folks joining us on Microsoft Teams. I see at least one MLA and a couple of folks from the AG office.

MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk, if you could introduce yourself, please.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk, MLA, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

The Chair: We have two other folks. Please introduce yourselves for the record.

Mr. Ireland: Good morning. Brad Ireland, Assistant Auditor General.

Ms Fleming: Good morning. Michelle Fleming, office of the Auditor General.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

A couple of housekeeping items. First, the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff, so you do not have to press the button to speak. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV, and the videostream and transcripts can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Those participating by videoconference are encouraged to please turn on your camera while speaking and to mute your microphone when not speaking and to turn off your camera as well. Members participating virtually who wish to be placed on the speakers list are asked to e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please just signal to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of this meeting.

Are there any changes or additions to the agenda, my friends?

Seeing none, I'll just ask someone in the room to move that the agenda for the April 19, 2022, meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be approved as distributed. Moved by Member Reid. Is there any discussion on this motion? All in favour? Are there any opposed? Thank you. That motion is carried. Members, please remute.

We'll now move on to approval of the minutes. We have minutes from our March 29 meeting of the committee. Do members have any errors or omissions to note?

Seeing none, I'll look to the floor for a member to move that the minutes of the March 29, 2022, meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be approved as distributed. Moved by Member Rowswell. Is there any discussion on this motion? Seeing none, all in favour? Any opposed? That motion is carried. Thank you.

Friends, we'll now move on to the business of our meeting today. We will welcome our guests from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. We are here today to consider the ministry's annual report from 2020-21 and outstanding recommendations from the Auditor General. I will note that we are in an in-session meeting, so that is the meeting whereby we have a little bit of a truncated rotation, 12 minutes and nine minutes each, for the various blocks of time given that we are in a morning sitting. Be that as it may, the ministry officials still have 10 minutes to begin their remarks.

That's 10 minutes, and your time starts when you start speaking.

Ms Cox: Thank you, Madam Chair, and again good morning. I'm pleased to present highlights from the Municipal Affairs annual report for 2021 and to provide an update on the three outstanding recommendations of the office of the Auditor General. In 2021 the ministry delivered on commitments in its 2023 business plan. Municipal Affairs provides supports for municipalities, guidance and training for local governments, property assessment and taxation supports, and investments in local infrastructure and public library services. We strengthen public safety through building codes and safety standards, licensing for home builders, and by preparing for and responding to large-scale emergencies across the province. We work with our municipal partners to support Albertans and the communities that they call home, and this is reflected in our latest annual report.

I'd like to highlight some of our major initiatives and achievements. Like all ministries, Municipal Affairs continued to address

the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout 2021. Our efforts to support Albertans and their communities included the following. We administered the municipal operating support transfer, providing \$576 million to help municipalities with the added expenses associated with the pandemic such as personal protective equipment, enhanced cleaning, and funds to lessen the impact of reduced tax and user-fee revenue.

We created the municipal stimulus program, or MSP, with a commitment of \$500 million towards shovel-ready projects in support of Alberta's economic recovery. The MSP funding has helped to get people working and build important infrastructure. The program also required municipalities to reduce red tape, an action that can further stimulate the economy because it makes it easier for businesses to expand or locate in their communities.

Other pandemic-related activities included the COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force, implementing isolation accommodations, implementing the community tables initiative in support of vulnerable Albertans, sourcing and providing PPE for the non health care sector, and co-ordinating support via the Alberta bits and pieces program.

Even as Municipal Affairs dealt with the unprecedented environment of the pandemic, we carried out significant business plan activities that advanced long-term goals. The ministry supported hundreds of municipal infrastructure projects across the province through a variety of annual grant programs. Building new and upgrading existing local infrastructure is vital to creating safe, sustainable, and viable communities where Albertans can work, raise their families, and thrive.

These capital commitments included \$970.9 million through the municipal sustainability initiative, or MSI, to help fund local infrastructure projects across the province such as roads, bridges, recreation, parks, transit, waste-water facility, and other municipal infrastructure. In related support, \$29.1 million was provided in MSI operating grants; \$244 million in capital funding was provided through the federal gas tax fund, now known as the Canada community building fund; and under the small communities fund, four more of the 56 approved projects were completed from the funding commitment made in 2015, when Alberta and Canada each committed \$94 million.

Municipal Affairs' efforts to strengthen communities also continued in our work to support Alberta's public libraries, which are vital community hubs. We are pleased to have maintained stable funding for libraries in 2021. Our support included public operating grants, support for SuperNet access in public libraries, interlibrary loan management, province-wide e-content, and breaking down barriers to library access. We have a very strong public library network in this province, and the benefits to Albertans were made abundantly clear as the pandemic continued. In 2021 e-content use increased by 250 per cent as Albertans still use library services to check out an e-book, participate in online programming, or keep up with news from around the world. Government support to that important work allowed libraries to keep delivering valuable services to Albertans while public health restrictions kept us safe.

An important part of our ministry's business is keeping Albertans safe in their homes and communities by managing the safety code systems, which ensures that Alberta's built environment is safe. To improve accountability in the safety code system, we added administrative penalties as a tool to support local enforcement. We were also working with the Safety Codes Council to enable risk-based inspections, improving efficiency and safety outcomes.

The ministry further increased efficiency for the construction industry while maintaining consumer protection by removing the requirement for building assessment reports on new condominiums. These reports duplicated information already available and added

needless costs to home builders and homebuyers. This change reduced the average cost per unit by \$400, for annual overall savings of \$2.6 million. Nationally all provinces have been making progress to reduce provincial trade barriers in safety codes through the construction codes reconciliation agreement, which will provide free electronic access to several safety codes and further our harmonization efforts.

The ministry is also committed to protecting Albertans through new-home warranty and builder licensing. Albertans deserve to know that their new homes in Alberta are safe, built to high standards, and that their investment is protected. To support that, we made improvements to the residential protection program following an internal review in 2020. The ministry implemented a more detailed system for documenting consumer complaints to allow us to track trends and identify key areas of concern. The ministry will continue to evaluate new-home buyer protection policies and programs to ensure that they're meeting the intended outcomes.

8:10

Continuing on the topic of public safety, earlier I mentioned a few of our pandemic-related activities. Of course, the Alberta Emergency Management Agency's Provincial Operations Centre, or the POC, was also key to the government's response to the 2020 flood events in 31 northern and central Alberta communities. As a result, six disaster recovery programs were approved, with a total of \$178 million in available support for those municipalities, with 1,890 private-sector applications from homeowners, small businesses, and other eligible applicants.

As important as recovery support is, we have a critical role in making sure that Albertans and Alberta communities are encouraged to take appropriate mitigation measures to reduce the impact of disasters. With the increasing cost and frequency of disasters, it's becoming increasingly important for all Albertans and Alberta organizations, including municipalities, to manage their risks. With that in mind, in early 2021 we took the prudent step of introducing a new cost-share approach to the disaster recovery program, recognizing that recovery from a disaster is a shared responsibility. Under this revised model the Alberta government will continue to provide 90 per cent of disaster recovery costs, with municipalities, homeowners, and small businesses responsible for the remaining 10 per cent.

Turning now to the three outstanding recommendations from the Auditor General, the first two recommendations, from September 2020, are part of Alberta's emergency management system. The first of two related recommendations is the need to implement a system to develop and maintain a provincial hazard assessment. The ministry has developed a multiphased approach to implementing this recommendation, with the hazard identification and risk assessment, or HIRA, framework. The plans for HIRA include the development of tools, templates, and training; a process review; and stakeholder engagement. The HIRA is intended to provide the government of Alberta and its stakeholders with a consistent, comprehensive, and integrated disaster risk management process.

The finalized HIRA framework was shared with the Auditor General's office in October 2020, and in December they confirmed that the HIRA framework and implementation plan would result in meeting its recommendation. Since then, the ministry has developed a workbook and related forms, which we will be sharing with all government of Alberta ministries and select stakeholders for their review this spring.

The second recommendation on hazard assessment is the need to improve the monitoring and reporting of postincident disaster reviews. Municipal Affairs now has an approved method and form

for reporting progress of postincident reviews and recommendations. Changes include more detailed descriptions of deliverables, deadlines, and status reporting as well as clarified roles and responsibilities for reviewing, approving, and completing the reports.

These changes have also been reviewed by the OAG, who is satisfied with the process being implemented. The first revised reports were issued to the respective ADM and DM public safety committees in December 2020. Updates on this will form a regular part of these two committees' work plans. The next scheduled meeting with the OAG audit team is May of this year, and at that time we will confirm the next steps required to bring this recommendation to conclusion.

The third recommendation, which is currently in progress, relates to flood mitigation identified in the AG's March 2015 report. This is a complex issue involving a delicate balance between public safety and the rights of property owners. As such, we'll need to take into consideration how solutions intersect with things like federal flood insurance to make sure that they're informed by up-to-date flood maps and engage stakeholders who would be impacted by these plans.

In conclusion, I'm proud to acknowledge that in all of our roles, responsibilities, and programs Municipal Affairs is committed to making the lives of Albertans better. We would be pleased to take your questions.

The Chair: Well, very good. That was well timed.

We'll now move it over to the office of the Auditor General for their comments. You have five minutes for opening remarks, please.

Mr. Wylie: Well, thank you, Chair. I'm not going to go over the performance audit recommendations that the deputy just highlighted and the progress that the ministry is making other than to say that we are working with the ministry on their implementation plans and will continue to do so until the recommendations are implemented.

I would like to supplement on one area, though, and that's the financial statement audit work that we do at the ministry. In addition to the performance audit work, we actually completed nine separate financial statement audits, and those include the special areas trust and the Kananaskis improvement district and seven other improvement districts. In all cases the audit opinions were clean or unqualified. We didn't have any issues with the financial reporting. In addition, we also completed the financial transaction work at the ministry that's necessary for us to conclude on the consolidated financial statements of the province.

With that, Chair, I'll turn it back to you.

The Chair: Very good.

So we'll now move on to our first rotation. We have the Official Opposition with the time block of 12 minutes. I see Member Schmidt is going to lead off.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much. I want to thank the officials from Municipal Affairs for joining us. I want to discuss the second wave of the pandemic and the minister's leadership of the department during that time. As all Albertans remember, we got hit hard during the second wave. Government was slow to respond, and because of that, Albertans were locked down for Christmas.

On page 70 of the report you note that the Provincial Operations Centre went to level 3 on November 3. On page 71 you talk about the invocation of a public health emergency on November 24. Things were very, very serious, but the minister responsible for the Emergency Management Agency and the vice-chair of the Emergency Management Cabinet Committee left for Hawaii. I'm

wondering: when did the department learn that the minister would be leaving her post during an emergency?

Ms Cox: I wasn't aware of that, to be fair. That's the first time I've heard that.

Mr. Schmidt: Sorry. That's the first time you heard that?

Ms Cox: Oh, I'm sorry. I apologize. I understand now. We have a new minister. Honestly, I was not in Municipal Affairs at that time, Madam Chair, so I'm not aware of when that was understood.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. But you've got other people around you who were presumably in the department at the time. I'm wondering if there's anyone from the department who could speak to that issue to the committee today.

Ms Cox: I'm looking to my table. I don't see that anyone can.

Mr. Schmidt: So nobody here in this committee room was in the department when the minister left her post in November or December?

Ms Cox: Apologies. Again, Madam Chair, I'm saying that none of us were aware of the minister departing.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. So nobody here in the room today was aware that the minister had left for Hawaii during December 2020. Is that a fair statement?

Ms Cox: Yes.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you very much. I mean, at some point it came out in the public record that the minister was gone.

Ms Cox: Yes.

Mr. Schmidt: This department is responsible for giving advice to the minister. Did anyone give advice to the minister that maybe jetting off to Hawaii during the middle of an emergency was a bad idea?

Ms Cox: No. What I can also say, if you're interested, in terms of the way in which the Provincial Operations Centre elevates through the sort of escalation between levels 1, 2, 3, and 4, those decisions are certainly made at the public service level with the interest of Albertans' safety in mind. I could happily have Stephen Lacroix talk a bit about what sort of factors go into the decision to escalate to level 3, as you've cited from the annual report. Just to be clear, those are things that we would absolutely, of course, inform the minister of. But those decisions are made within the public service.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, I think that goes on to my next question, then. If somebody from the department could explain to us the process that occurs when we are in an emergency and the minister leaves the country, I guess. How does the department learn that the minister who is accountable for this agency is leaving, and what is the process for making sure that there's continuity of command and decision-making during that time?

Ms Cox: Yeah. We can absolutely – I'll have Steve talk a bit about the different escalation points. I think, for the record, it's important to note that, of course, while the Minister of Municipal Affairs is responsible for the Alberta Emergency Management Agency, the state of public health emergency was made under the Public Health Act, and the minister responsible is the Minister of Health.

Stephen, may I ask you to just talk a bit about the different escalation points?

Mr. Lacroix: Yeah. Thanks, Deputy and Madam Chair. Well, I guess I can make a couple of points. In terms of the escalation, as the deputy mentioned, it is a bureaucratic decision, so to speak, aligned with what we think we need in terms of tools to be able to provide a crossgovernment response to whatever the emergency may be.

8:20

In terms of the pandemic we were watching numbers like everybody else, not being the emergency centre necessarily responsible for the response to the pandemic, which resided in Health, but being the connective tissue, so to speak, with other ministries and, probably more importantly, in the business that Municipal Affairs is involved in, the connection with the emergency managers from the various municipalities across the province. Now, based on the numbers on hospitalization, on ICU numbers, on the needs of the municipalities we connect with, we decided to elevate at that time the POC to level 3 to provide additional reporting, have additional staff on hand to be able to answer those questions and do that crossgovernment co-ordination I was speaking about.

Now, in terms of the minister leaving or not, I can reassure you that we were not made aware; however, there is a mechanism within the government of Alberta to assume the interim in the case of elected officials leaving for whatever reason. We're not privy to that necessarily. However, the government of Alberta body that we reported to on any issues that dealt with emergencies were two, so it was either the Emergency Management Cabinet Committee, that we would brief through our minister or directly depending on the topic, and the Priorities Implementation Cabinet Committee. Those were the two governing bodies, that we would have seen over that reporting period, where the agency or the ministry would have been responsible to provide information to.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much. So we know that the bureaucracy helped prepare the minister for her international travels. We have a FOIP that shows that her cellphone plan was upgraded so that she could communicate in Hawaii, officials provided advice about logging on to the hotel Wi-Fi, and your report notes on page 14 that we were at such a high level of threat that you were co-ordinating a whole-of-society response. In these circumstances, when the government message was to stay home and not visit loved ones over Christmas – I know I didn't see my own mother on Christmas Day – I do find it odd that the minister jet-setted to Hawaii. Can the official tell us: has the minister responsible for the Emergency Management Agency ever left the country during a state of emergency?

Ms Cox: I cannot tell you that. No.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, what an excellent set of questions and responses we're getting from the department today.

In an emergency command and control is essential. I'm sure that you would agree with that statement. It goes to the heart of this ministry's mandate. We know from the report that the ministry took COVID-19 seriously, issued a state of emergency, and had the POC at level 3. I want to talk about the process for ensuring continuity of command. The minister relieved herself from the command structure from December 19, 2020, to January 10, 2021. She signed a memo delegating authority to the Minister of Transportation, and that memo was addressed to the Premier, but let me quote the Premier's spokesperson at the time: the Premier did not see the

memo in question; it was never brought to his attention; the Premier was not aware of the minister's travel plan.

Mr. Walker: Point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Hon. member, we have a point of order on the floor.

Mr. Walker: Under 23(b), Chair. The member's line of questioning falls outside the scope of the annual report of April 1, 2020, to March 31, 2021, and he stated it in his most recent line of questioning. I would just ask him to come back into the scope of the report chronologically, Chair.

Thank you.

The Chair: Yes. Please.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. The member clearly stated that his question related to statements that were made and a delegation of authority within December 2020 to January 2021, which is well within the scope of the annual report, and addressing that second wave of the pandemic, which is mentioned multiple times in the annual report, including the pages referenced by the member himself.

The Chair: Thank you.

I will find that this particular line of questioning is within the timeline scope, which was the point of order. There is not a point of order.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

So, just to recap, the Premier's spokesperson had said that the Premier wasn't aware that the minister was out of the country. I'm wondering: can officials shed some light on how this is possible? How could the Premier not be aware that the minister responsible for emergency management during an emergency was not in the country? If you could speak to where the system failure was and what learnings you made through this process, I think that would be helpful for the committee to understand what was going on at the department at the time.

Ms Cox: Thank you, Madam Chair, for the question. I would suggest that a question with respect to the operations and machinery of the Premier's office is better provided to the Premier's office, not to the public service who – I'm very happy to talk about incident command and reassure the member that we did not have any issues with respect to incident command. That is something that we could definitely speak to.

Mr. Schmidt: So the responsible minister leaves the country, and nobody at the department has a responsibility to tell anybody else in government that this person has gone?

Ms Cox: To be clear, the responsible minister under a state of public health emergency is the Minister of Health. Certainly, the emergency management operations centre, our Provincial Operations Centre, was escalated to be able to provide any necessary support to the health emergency operations centre, as we do through, you know, various points within the pandemic. That is a decision, again, that is made at the public service level, and the incident command structure in this case was maintained through the public service.

Mr. Schmidt: So if I understand you correctly, the ministry did nothing to ensure that the Deputy Minister of Executive Council, for example, knew that the minister was out of the country?

Ms Cox: I honestly cannot tell you whether or not there was any communication.

Mr. Schmidt: I appreciate that you weren't there at the time. However, you've got an entire cotillion here of officials, some of whom were there. Can you turn round and see if anybody else can speak to the issue? This is an incredibly important piece, issue of public policy, and I think the people of Alberta deserve a better answer than that you weren't there at the time.

Ms Cox: I'd happily again check with my colleagues to see if anyone was aware or had communicated that awareness beyond our office. I am seeing that folks are not indicating that . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Somebody steps forward and everybody takes a step back, like in the old army jokes.

Okay. So in a state of emergency when the Provincial Operations Centre plays a central role, in accordance with outcome 4 of the report, that Alberta is emergency ready and resilient, on page 68, what is the normal process for the bureaucracy to know when the minister responsible is away, and was that process followed here?

Ms Cox: I will ask Stephen if he's aware of what the normal process is. Again, I would suggest that all of the response was contained within the public service, so, you know, your earlier question with respect to lessons learned: I think that what I do know of the Alberta Emergency Management Agency is that those staff did an absolutely incredible job, as did all of the consequence management officers that would have been at the Provincial Operations Centre from other ministries to be able to support the health emergency operations centre.

Stephen, anything you'd want to add?

Mr. Lacroix: Yeah. Madam Chair, I don't have much to add other than that all this was kind of transparent to us, right? We need to understand that politicians will make their decisions.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go over for 12 minutes on the government side, please.

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the department. Before I start, I just wanted to say thank you for all the work you do. The work you have done during COVID-19 was great, and thank you very much.

Well, if you look at page 72 of the annual report, it explains that in April 2020 the Alberta Emergency Management Agency established the personal protective equipment task force in response to the pandemic and the increasing and rapid need for personal protective equipment for numerous organizations across Alberta to prevent the potential exposure to COVID-19.

I see on the graphic that the main stakeholders who received such personal protective equipment were health care and social workers, which is about 73.8 per cent; public security is about 15.79 per cent; and others such as personal wellness, acupuncture, and business, about 9.47 per cent; food service, less than 1 per cent, is .76 per cent; and utilities is .11 per cent. So my first question is: how many pieces of PPE were sent during the 2020 and 2021 period?

8:30

Ms Cox: Thank you, Madam Chair. In response to that question, in the fiscal year of 2020-21 we were able to ship out 53.3 million products to the non health care sector, and that came from just under 20,000 unique requests. If I may, I would just add that our total up to this point is over 100 million. Forgive me for moving into this fiscal year, but I'm incredibly proud of the work of the PPE Task Force.

Mr. Toor: Thank you. During the pandemic the provision for personal protective equipment has been unpredictable. What were

the main challenges that the task force faced, and what was done to overcome those?

Ms Cox: Thank you. Like many Albertans would have experienced, our main challenge was, of course, around the supply chain. The demand for PPE, particularly in the fiscal year that we're referencing, far exceeded the available supply. This meant that we needed to be really careful in terms of prioritizing our PPE provision to focus on clients who are really, you know, supporting vulnerable organizations in the province and making sure that those folks were equipped with PPE first before being able to expand our outreach. We were able to collaborate with groups in Alberta Health, Alberta Health Services, as well as the Public Health Agency of Canada to help us establish the correct supply chains and to really make sure that we were leveraging them in order to get PPE in the hands of those that needed it most.

Mr. Toor: Thank you. Can you further explain the measures taken by the task force to support especially the school boards across the province during the fiscal year in question?

Ms Cox: Thank you again for that question. Certainly, we had a key role in procuring and distributing reusable masks for staff and students across Alberta, and we did this on behalf of Alberta Education to support a safe return to school in September 2020. This included essentially facilitating and distributing masks. We also had a role to play in terms of donated cleaning and disinfecting products, hand sanitizer as well as face shields. In total, we were able to provide about 2 and a half million products to 533 schools or school authorities across the province.

Mr. Toor: Thank you.

Madam Chair, I'll pass my time to MLA Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Thank you so much. I first of all want to say that the pandemic caused an incredible stress for everyone, and I just want to be very forthright with my gratitude. Your team jumped up and really came to our rescue in a number of different ways. One of them in my community was PPE that was required by funeral directors. The president of the organization lives in my community. Of course, we were dealing with a time when no one really knew what the effects of COVID were going to be, so, you know, with cause, they were concerned. Thank you so much for getting that much-needed equipment to them.

The other thing that happened was – you know, I live in a community that's very diverse. In the northern part by Viking we have St. Thomas Lake, which is at the verge of flooding a provincial highway and flooding a number of homes. There are always those kinds of concerns. In the southern part of the constituency fires are an issue, so it goes from too much water to not enough. There are all kinds of situations that you have to deal with. That leads me to my question here: what contingency funding is available in case of emergency?

Ms Cox: Contingency funding is, of course, available through Treasury Board and Finance in terms of their budget. In this year I believe it was \$750 million – I'm getting a nod – in terms of that fiscal year. That was increased, of course, in this year's budget.

Ms Lovely: Thank you for that answer.

Next question: how was the disaster mitigation and adaptation fund used in Alberta that year? How much money was received from the federal government, and how was this funding used? Also, if you could address which communities benefited from the fund.

Ms Cox: The disaster mitigation and adaptation fund, or DMAF, is, of course, a federal funding program, and the Alberta Emergency Management Agency had some role to play with respect to coordinating applications, but it's the Ministry of Environment and Parks that's responsible for delivering that program in partnership with the government of Canada. I'm sorry that I won't be able to provide an answer to that question.

Ms Lovely: That's no problem at all.

My next question is regarding the federal flood insurance and relocation developments. Alberta was participating in the federal flood insurance and relocation project. This program is important to expanding access to overland flood insurance and supporting the development of relocation options for high flood risk properties. I see on page 74 that the task force was focusing on examining options for low-cost residential flood insurance for residents of high-risk areas and consider options for potential relocation for residents of areas at the highest risk of recurring flooding. Considering that the government of Canada has expanded recommendations from this work in April 2022, could you provide an update on the work that this task force did?

Ms Cox: Absolutely. This is an important question because, of course, it pertains to one of our outstanding recommendations from the office of the Auditor General with respect to floodway development. The task force has conducted an analysis of the viability and costing for flood insurance by really looking at different options for low-cost residential flood insurance for residents of high-risk areas, considering strategies for potential options for relocation. This has included numerous different engagements conducted by the federal government with Indigenous communities through focused dialogues with First Nations as well as those off-reserve, Inuit and Métis communities, organizations, and individuals.

The work of the task force will culminate with the development and submission of a statement-of-fact report which will be public facing, and that will be related to the Deputy Minister of Public Safety Canada and the president of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, or CMHC. The report has been drafted by PSC staff and has been sent to all members of the task force for review and feedback – that's the point we're at right now – and it really does provide an evidence-based foundation for flood risk in Canada and the findings of the task force on insurance options and parameters and models for potential insurance arrangements and relocation strategy. I'm happy to say that the Alberta Emergency Management Agency has been working extensively and involved with other government of Alberta departments in reviewing and providing comments and feedback on the draft statement-of-fact report.

Ms Lovely: Thank you so much for the answer.

With that, I would like to pass my remaining time over to MLA Rowswell.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you very much. I'd like to talk a little about DRP changes. Municipal Affairs is in charge of the province's disaster recovery program. I see on page 80 that during 2020-21 the administration of disaster recovery programs included six extraordinary disaster events, and \$178 million in disaster assistance was approved. I looked further into the report just to see how that was divided up a little bit. Maybe you can expand on that, but I was just curious. Like, it looks like \$26 million went to the private sector, about \$30 million went to municipalities, \$34 million went to other ministries for their infrastructure and stuff like that, and that's kind of it. I'm just curious about: did the rest go to

residential? Like, I'm trying to add the \$178 million up to what was actually spent. Given that, can the ministry provide an overview of the assistance and programs supported under the DRP in the province?

Ms Cox: For sure. To your last question, through the chair, AEMA does provide financial assistance through disaster recovery programs, or the DRP, as well as the municipal wildfire assistance program, which is sometimes referred to as an MWAP. We also have other conditional grant agreements that might be executed to support recovery, and those are directed through our minister.

On the DRP program specifically, to give it a bit of background, you know, this relates to programs where there's overland flooding and where there isn't available flood insurance that could be accessible to a resident, as you noted, for example. We do have other types of disasters in the province that wouldn't qualify because there is readily available insurance such as sewer backups, for instance – insurance deductibles, I will note, aren't eligible for this type of financial assistance – and if Albertans have chosen not to insure or they've underinsured their property, then they would not be eligible either.

On the municipal wildfire assistance program, this is really about financial assistance that's available to municipalities that incur extraordinary expenses for wildfire suppression outside of Alberta's forest protection area.

There were six DRPs, as you mentioned, and that relates to the \$178.2 million under the disaster recovery program: \$153.4 million was for the 2020 northern Alberta flood DRP following flooding and groundwater seepage due to rain, snowmelt, and ice jams that occurred from April 22 to May 4, 2020, in 18 northern Alberta communities; \$6 million was for the Calgary and area DRP – that included northeast Calgary, Rocky View county, and Airdrie – for damages that were caused by overland flooding resulting from a severe hailstorm on June 13, 2020; \$10.8 million relates to the east-central Alberta flood DRP.

8:40

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move on to our second rotation, the Official Opposition for nine minutes.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Okay. Again, in accordance with outcome 4 of the report on page 68, the ministry, the Alberta Emergency Management Agency, the Provincial Operations Centre, and Executive Council must know who's around to make decisions during a state of emergency. The Premier claimed that he only learned that his chief of staff was leaving the country as he was en route to the airport. That seems unbelievable to me, so we have to ask this question: does the ministry or Alberta Emergency Management Agency keep an active list of which key decision-makers are around at any time during an emergency? And by key decision-makers I mean people who have either legal or functional authority to make decisions and give direction.

Ms Cox: I don't know that we have a list per se. I think that we always are aware of who is making decisions if we do need to escalate them. You know, the location of that decision-maker is a bit unimportant if, in fact, the decision is able to be made through different mechanisms that we have available to us. Again, I would just reference that with respect to this annual report and the events that you're relating to, the decision-making that we're talking about in terms of escalating to a level 3 within the Alberta Emergency Management Agency – those things were made at the public service level, so we had decision-makers present to be able to support that.

Ms Renaud: If I'm understanding correctly, there is no mechanism within this ministry to know where key decision-makers are or who is the key decision-maker, who is the elected key decision-maker, at any time. So how do you figure out who to speak to?

Ms Cox: I again would say that we don't have, as I'm aware, a list per se and that if we needed to escalate a decision to our elected minister, we would have reached her to get a decision, as would be required.

Ms Renaud: Okay. How do you know who to call? Is it just, like, trial and error, or is there some signing authority that you would be aware of? Or was there any kind of a memo that your ministry had? Or is it just really not that important or relevant that you don't worry about it?

Ms Cox: I wouldn't suggest that it's not important or relevant. I don't think that that's a fair statement. I think that we are always able to reach the folks that we need to in order to make decisions.

Ms Renaud: Okay. On page 16 and 17 of the report you discuss the various committees of the civil service who work on public safety. There's both an ADM and a DM committee which the ministry chairs, and you note that they played an active role in the pandemic. Let me quote from the report. "The committees were key in the province's COVID-19 response... the committees provided coordination... [and] ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic." Were either the ADM or DM committees informed or made aware that the minister and the Premier's chief of staff, individuals with real legal and functional authority, had left the country during a state of emergency?

Ms Cox: I'm happy to answer that question again by saying that, as we've already said, we were not aware that our minister was absent.

Ms Renaud: You were not aware during a state of emergency – nobody in the ministry was aware of where the Minister of Municipal Affairs was during a state of emergency, during this period of time?

Ms Cox: Again, it was a state of public health emergency under the Public Health Act. The responsible minister was the Minister of Health.

Ms Renaud: Yes, I understand that. But this ministry – you were not aware of where this minister was during the state of emergency?

Ms Cox: I have already said that, in fact, that is the case.

Ms Renaud: Albertans heard the message loud and clear during the second wave at Christmastime. I think it's a Christmas none of us will forget: "Stay home. Don't travel. Don't even visit friends and loved ones. Don't visit your neighbours." It was tough. According to public polling Albertans listened to the government's direction. We followed the public health orders more religiously than other provinces, but senior decision-makers in government, including the minister responsible for emergency management, did not follow that advice.

Mr. Singh: Point of order.

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Singh: Madam Chair, the point of order is under Standing Order 23(b), the member "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion." The committee has convened for the purpose of considering the ministry's account. The matter that has been raised

by the member is not within the boundaries of this said topic. The issue is that PAC is about policy implications and not a minister's action.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Pancholi: Madam Chair, I believe the whole purpose of the Public Accounts Committee, as the member has stated, is to evaluate choices that were made by the ministry, who is led by the minister. Again, the annual report and the documents before us in this committee deal extensively with how the ministry, led by the minister, responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Chair: Thank you.

I will just, you know, direct the hon. member that she is to stay to the contents of the annual report. Having said that, I haven't heard the question. It's difficult to rule whether it's in or out of order because we didn't get to the question, so I'm going to ask the member to get to the question perhaps more quickly, and then we can ascertain at that time. Just get to the question, and then once a response has been received, move on.

Thank you, hon. member.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Let me ask this. Is any official in the room today aware of any direction or advice, however implicit, that it was okay to leave the country during December 2020?

Ms Cox: I can speak for myself, and what I can say is that I understood the direction to not travel.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Going back to some of the things you said a little earlier, that there isn't a list of key decision-makers with legal or functional authority but you were confident that you could reach the minister at any time. What about when she was flying to Hawaii? Who would you call?

Ms Cox: Again, if we needed to reach the minister and were unable to reach her because she was flying, we could certainly reach out to the Premier's office if we needed to.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So you're confident that you could reach the Premier's office, say his chief of staff, who was also not in the country?

Ms Cox: I'm confident I could have reached, if I were in this role at that time, who I needed to in order to execute a decision if, in fact, one was required, which it was not.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I'd like to ask some final questions about the second wave and tracking of officials leaving the country, continuity of command, et cetera, and this is all in accordance with outcome 4 of this annual report on page 68. What lessons, if any, did the ministry learn about folks leaving during a state of emergency? Did you change any internal processes as a result to better track who was around? The public, in my view, was rightly angry after what is known as AlohaGate. I'm sure you realize that. Did you do a hotwash to learn any lessons on that specific incident, and if yes, what specifically did this ministry learn?

Ms Cox: I'm not aware of any hotwash meetings to review any issues as there were no issues that arose.

Ms Renaud: Okay. So there is nothing that you would change? There's nothing that this ministry has learned from this episode or would do differently in any way?

Ms Cox: I feel that the ministry was able to execute on its responsibilities during the second wave and through our escalation processes and the existing incident command approach.

Ms Renaud: So the fact that the minister would have been unreachable for a period of time – the ministry, as you said, didn't realize she was gone or didn't know she was gone, but you're confident that everything would be fine nevertheless.

Ms Cox: Yes.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I'm going to turn it over to my colleague for some follow-up questions.

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah. I just want to point out for the committee here that at some point you said that you understood the order not to travel; however, your department did actively aid the minister in travelling to a foreign country. You upgraded her cellphone plan. You told her how to get on Wi-Fi at the hotel. We have the documents to show that that's the truth. You know, I wish that the department would have encouraged the minister more strongly to have followed the health orders, like you said you understood you were all told to do.

8:50

On page 17 of the report it says that going forward, it is expected that the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to take precedence for at least the first half of the 2021-22 fiscal year. At the same time, Municipal Affairs will continue to make progress on the outcomes identified in its 2021-24 business plan.

Your report talks about a time period through to September of 2021, and outcome 4 of the plan on page 68 says that your goal is to ensure that Alberta is emergency ready. We've asked a lot of questions about chain of command, so my first question is this. During the time in the late summer when the Premier was away but he claims that he was working 24/7, who frequently did the head of the Alberta emergency management association brief? Who were you briefing during that time?

Ms Cox: I'm sorry. May I ask, through the chair: which time period are you referencing, specifically?

Mr. Schmidt: We're talking about – page 17 of the report says that you had learned some lessons during the second wave. You said that you could reach anybody during a time of emergency, so during the delta wave who was emergency management association providing briefings to when the Premier was away?

The Chair: All right. Very good.

We'll now move on to the government side. Nine minutes, second rotation, please.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you. You were partway through talking about the various disasters and the assistance that was provided, so maybe you can carry on.

Ms Cox: Certainly. I think we were at the east-central Alberta DRP, which was \$10.8 million following extraordinary rainfall in June 2020, which impacted seven different communities. There was also \$1.2 million for the village of Acme flood DRP in response to overland flooding due to extraordinary rainfall that happened on May 31, 2020; 6 and a half million dollars was provided to Saddle Hills county flood DRP following extraordinary rainfall and high stream flow between June 29 and July 15, 2020; and \$0.3 million was provided for the county of Minburn flood DRP following

overland flooding between August 3 and August 5, 2020. In 2021 the government of Alberta approved \$26 million in additional funding for 2020 DRPs. There was another \$1.6 million to add Athabasca county and Smoky Lake county to the 2020 east-central Alberta flood DRP and \$0.4 million to address additional eligible costs for the previously approved communities. Lastly, \$24 million was provided to support funding pressures identified in the 2020 northern Alberta flood.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Thank you. How did those disasters impact the budget for that year? Like, did you spend more than expected or less or about right?

Ms Cox: Again, the contingency fund for these types of events is within Treasury Board and Finance's budget of \$750 million in that fiscal year. At just shy of \$200 million we were certainly not going to exceed the amount of contingency available. I think, just to be clear, of course, that, you know, we are always able to go back to Treasury Board for additional support, as you saw that we did when we had maybe higher than expected eligible costs or additional communities that hydrological analysis would say were impacted by these severe flood events.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Thank you. I'm aware that there were several changes made to the DRP. If you can talk about those and elaborate on what the changes were and why they were necessary.

Ms Cox: Thank you again for the question. Just a bit of background in terms of the rationale. As we've seen, the cost and frequency of disasters in Alberta is increasing, and our province does need a strong fiscal framework in place in order to deal with those financial risks, which is why we made changes to the DRP. Prior to these changes, Alberta was the only province that did not cost share the financial risk and liability of disaster expenses through cost-sharing mechanisms, thresholds, residential funding limits, or restrictions for assistance in floodways as part of the disaster assistance program. Even with these changes, where Alberta is now in line with others in terms of cost sharing, we continue to be the most generous jurisdiction.

We do hope that this cost-sharing approach will encourage Albertans to mitigate disaster risks by doing things like purchasing appropriate insurance, reducing property development in high-risk areas, relocating for less disaster-prone areas, and doing any sort of mitigation that might assist their properties. What that cost-sharing arrangement looks like is a 90-10 split in terms of the province picking up 90 per cent of eligible costs and then the applicant, so potentially local government or other private-sector applicants, taking up 10 per cent. This helps to mitigate that.

In terms of funding limits for individual homeowners that was another change that we introduced, where we have a \$500,000 funding cap per homeowner application and a one-time limit on disaster financial assistance per property. These things aren't retroactive, so if there were claims that were in place before this change was implemented, then you would not be subject to the cap or to the one time per event per property. This is really, again, so that we are not investing Albertans' taxpayer dollars into the same property over and over again. There are limits on the sort of public support for those properties that are in flood-prone areas, for example.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you. I'd just like to go to conditional grant agreements relative to relocation. In relation to the 2020 Alberta spring flooding events multiple communities were impacted, including Mackenzie county and the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo, which had the declared states of local emergency in

response to the flooding due to ice jams on the Peace and the Athabasca. These events impacted communities in Fort Vermilion and Fort McMurray. In Fort Vermilion alone there were 503 evacuees, apparently, and in Fort McMurray there were just over 3,800, and there were additional communities of First Nations of both regions affected by the flooding that occurred. Throughout the response of these events the Provincial Operations Centre continued to refine and improve processes. What were the main lessons learned during the response to these events?

Ms Cox: Specific to those events, Madam Chair, we learned that, you know, as personnel may be required to support an event, those should be requested immediately by the impacted communities. Many have mutual aid agreements in place, and so we want – we definitely learned that communities need to leverage those existing mutual aid agreements as soon as they're in an event.

We were also very happy to have been able to deploy an all-hazards incident management team to both locations through the Alberta Emergency Management Agency. The results were very effective in supporting those impacted communities. One of our lessons learned is about those all-hazards incident management teams and the success that they can bring to the table, so wanting to make sure that we're deploying them in future events.

We also made some updates to different tools to support responses, including the registration and reception centre process. The ability to use other electronic tools should be delayed if they're scheduled to occur at the same time as an event. Really trying to make sure that we are really reducing disruption as a result of systems impacts.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. How did the pandemic affect response to those events?

Ms Cox: Certainly, evacuations that you noted, again – sorry – through the chair: definitely, an evacuation during a pandemic is more complex in terms of managing evacuees. In order to support local authorities in undertaking safe and effective evacuations, we had to develop new procedures, with the support and collaboration of Alberta Health, Alberta Health Services, and the chief medical officer of health as well as the emergency social services team. We also had increased costs as a result of the pandemic, and we needed to be innovative. As a result, we started establishing drive-through reception centres. What that meant is that evacuees could be greeted, directed, received, and, you know, provided the information that they needed, really, to be able to support and enable safe physical distancing.

9:00

The accommodation of choice was the use of commercial or group lodging, such as hotels, rather than, you know, maybe the conventional evacuation centre that you might think of in these types of events, and this was to make sure that individuals wouldn't be congregated in one location, like in a recreation centre, for example, where COVID could in fact spread more readily.

I will also note that the Provincial Operations Centre was elevated in response to COVID at the time of the 2020 spring flood events, so a separate incident had to be created.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move on to the third rotation, please, the Official Opposition.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Madam Chair. My next question is to the Auditor General. Mr. Wylie, you know that our caucus has been concerned about the chain of command during the pandemic. We've asked a number of questions here this morning, and the last

time we asked you this question, you informed us that you were seeking legal advice on whether or not you could conduct this audit. I'm wondering if you could provide an update to the committee on whether or not you've received this legal advice and made a decision on whether or not you can conduct this audit.

Mr. Wylie: We have received the legal advice, and we are assessing the advice that we received. I can assure you that we did receive the request. We're reviewing that request following our normal processes. If we do any work related to that request, we'll be reporting through our normal public mechanism.

Mr. Schmidt: Great. You're going to leave us in suspense as far as timelines go.

Mr. Wylie: I'm afraid that with the legislation that I adhere to, there is a specific requirement for how our work is conducted as well as how it's finalized and publicly reported. I certainly will be respecting the legislation that I follow.

Mr. Schmidt: I appreciate that, and I know that Albertans are waiting eagerly for the outcome of that decision.

I just want to go back now to the officials from Municipal Affairs. On page 17 of the report it says that "going forward, it is expected that the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to take precedence for at least the first half of the 2021-22 fiscal year." It's clear from a reading of this report that you intended to discuss events that were happening in the '21-22 fiscal year today, so that's what I have some questions around. How many times did the department brief the Premier while he was away on holidays last summer during the delta wave?

Ms Cox: I'm sorry. I don't have a specific number in terms of briefings from last summer.

Mr. Schmidt: Would you be able to go back to the department and look up that information and provide that to the committee at a later date?

Ms Cox: Again, I understand where you're looking in terms of a note that talks about priorities for the coming business plan year. I don't know that I understand specifically the question related to the annual report, if I may.

Mr. Schmidt: The annual report talks about activities during the first half of the '21-22 fiscal year, but now you're hiding behind the annual report dates to avoid answering the question. I don't think the people of Alberta will find that acceptable. Would you be willing to go back to the department and find for the committee the information that I've asked for? How many times did the department brief the Premier while he was on holidays during the delta wave?

Ms Cox: I certainly am not intending to hide behind the annual report, Madam Chair. What I am indicating is that it's not unusual for annual reports to forecast priorities into the future.

Mr. Schmidt: It isn't unusual, and in the past when the departments have done that, these questions have been answered by other departments. Is it your position that you're not going to do the same thing that other departments are doing and avoid answering the question?

Ms Cox: I am not avoiding answering your question.

Mr. Walker: A point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Okay. Yes.

Mr. Walker: Under 23(b) and 23(j). Under 23(b) he's referencing a time period outside the annual report we're discussing, and then under 23(j) I feel the language of "hiding" and "avoiding questions" is abusive and insulting language possibly to cause disorder.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. As the member has repeatedly indicated, there are references within the annual report that's under consideration by this committee to the time period and goals for the question he's asking about. As well, you know, I don't believe the language of saying "hiding" has been ruled out of order as unparliamentary by the Speaker, so I think it's within the bounds of this discussion of this committee.

The Chair: Thanks.

Having heard interventions from both sides, it is true that both last year and in some previous iterations of the Public Accounts Committee ministries have discussed time periods outside of the fiscal year simply because they are referenced in the annual report. This happened last year. It has happened at other times, and I'll note even that the deputy referenced that in reference to a question about PPE earlier in our time here together. So that piece I'm comfortable with as long as people reference where they're getting the information and what they're actually querying about is behind the language in an annual report.

Now, as to the 23(j) piece, while hiding is not necessarily unparliamentary – there is no real precedent for that language being ruled unparliamentary. I will caution the member that speaking through the chair – and this is important to do, and generally speaking we try to employ third person. While, you know, stylistically or grammatically it doesn't always flow, it should flow in that way in addressing the deputy. So I'll just leave that note, and we can continue our questioning, please.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much. I'm going to give the deputy minister perhaps another opportunity to answer the question.

Ms Cox: I'm sorry. I don't, Madam Chair, have an answer to the question with respect to the number of times we would have briefed Executive Council or the Premier in that time frame.

Mr. Schmidt: That wasn't the question, Madam Chair. The question was whether or not the deputy minister would be willing to research that information and provide it to the committee at a later date.

Ms Cox: Yes.

Mr. Schmidt: You will. Thank you very much.

Now, in a similar vein, I'm wondering if the deputy minister can tell the committee how many times during the first half of fiscal '21-22 the COVID cabinet committee met. I appreciate that the deputy minister probably doesn't have that information at hand. Will she commit to tabling that information to the committee at a later date?

Ms Cox: The COVID cabinet committee is not the responsibility of Alberta Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. In the view of many Albertans during August and September 2021 the decision-making progress in government failed the public again. The delta wave crushed this province, and

we had a number of excess deaths. Following the flawed decision-making process that we saw happen during the second wave, you had to have plans in place to do things differently, and your own report notes on page 17 that you were planning for it. So what lessons did you learn during the second wave that were successfully applied during the third wave, and what lessons did the government fail to learn during the second wave that were not applied in the third wave?

Ms Cox: Madam Chair, the types of lessons that we learned relate more to our sort of core business around how the pandemic would impact our ability to execute on things like disaster recovery programs, establishing reception centres, those types of things, as I was indicating to another member's questions. Could you perhaps be more specific in terms of what you might be looking for if I may ask that?

Mr. Schmidt: Well, I mean, it's quite clear to any casual observer that the government of Alberta has failed spectacularly to manage the COVID pandemic in both the second wave – that's the topic of this report – and subsequent waves. You know, I think Albertans are rightly frustrated that the government is either incapable or unwilling to learn the lessons from the previous waves. Can the deputy minister please tell the people that they've learned something and that they're going to do something better at some point in the future?

Ms Cox: I can absolutely, Madam Chair, say that we learned many things through COVID. We learned that, for example, communication with local authorities was an important sort of way of being able to make sure that there was a good understanding across our communities. So we did things, for instance, like a weekly e-mail communication out to all municipalities, so 333 of them, and as you asked about, you know, what that meant in terms of potentially even this fiscal year, we were able to have telephone town halls. We were able to leverage local authorities to help support things like talking with their own community members to address vaccine hesitancy. Those were tables that we were able to utilize after seeing how effective those communication tools were throughout, for example, the second wave, leading into the third wave.

9:10

Mr. Schmidt: So is it fair to say that one of the lessons learned during the second wave was that Municipal Affairs should restrict the ability of local authorities to deal with the pandemic if the province fails to uphold its responsibilities?

Ms Cox: No.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Then explain to us what the ministry's position is on the ability of local authorities to respond to the pandemic when the province fails to meet its obligations.

Ms Cox: May I ask for a reference to the annual report, through the chair?

Mr. Schmidt: Good Lord, we just had the question about what you learned. Tell us – sorry. We just had the question about what the deputy minister learned. She said that, no, they didn't learn about restricting local authorities' ability. So what did you learn about the role of local authorities during pandemic management during the time of the annual report?

Ms Cox: During the time of the annual report we absolutely learned that local authorities have a critical role of working with their communities to know how to help them to do things like access

vaccines, what would be the most appropriate way to communicate with their members about hesitancy that they may have to be able to answer questions as leaders.

The Chair: Thank you.

Before we go to the government side, I just want – Member Hunter has joined us to replace Member Armstrong-Homeniuk, so, Member Hunter, if you could introduce yourself for the record, that would be great.

Mr. Hunter: Grant Hunter, Taber-Warner.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

We'll now go to the government side, please.

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for your time and for joining us today. I appreciate having you here. It's so great to actually be able to meet with you in person again and review your annual report, so I want to personally thank you for your time here with us.

Red tape reduction. One of the things I heard early, early on from my municipalities after I was elected was regarding just the time and expense that it takes for municipalities to get things done, so very, very pleased with this government's focus on reducing red tape. We know that that's one way that we can support especially my rural municipalities, that are not necessarily staffed up in the way our leadership is able to spend time that some of our largest centres are, so red tape reduction for my small rural communities is certainly very important.

I just want to ask some questions related to red tape. You know, I'm aware that red tape reduction principles were included in the development of the municipal stimulus program and the municipal operating transfer programs to ensure that programs could be delivered in a streamlined manner. Could you elaborate for us which red tape reduction principles were used and how they reflect on each of these programs?

Ms Cox: Thank you for the question, Madam Chair. The government of Alberta, of course, does define red tape as things that are unnecessary time or resources spent by citizens, staff, and businesses to comply with regulatory and administrative requirements imposed by legislation, regulation, and associated policies, forms, and guides. So, absolutely, the member is correct in noting that our grant programs do have requirements that are imposed on municipalities in making those applications.

For the purposes of the municipal stimulus program, or MSP, as well as the municipal operating support transfer, or MOST, we did really look closely at how to minimize the amount of red tape that we would be potentially imposing on applicants. We did things like using a single funding agreement covering all projects rather than a funding agreement for each project. As you can anticipate, with the type of, you know, dollars that we're talking about, a billion plus between the two of them, there are numerous projects that each municipality may be applying on, so having one agreement is certainly very streamlined compared to having an individual agreement for each project.

We also were very cognizant of wanting to streamline our processes, forms, and documentation to make sure that we were collecting information as efficiently as possible, still needing to make sure that we are being accountable. These are taxpayer dollars, so you know the type of information that we were asking for needed to be sufficient to make sure that, in fact, the projects were eligible and that this was a good use of those dollars. We did want to make sure that the guidelines for MSP and MOST were being followed, but we didn't want to collect sort of extraneous

information that wasn't required for program administration. So limiting the conditions for funding under both programs was another principle that we followed.

Under the MOST program, for example, no applications were required, and there were very few conditions for the funding other than some eligibility criteria for various program elements such as, for example, if you're receiving dollars associated with potentially lost user-fee revenue on public transit systems, of course you had to have a public transit system in place.

We wanted to also make it simple for municipalities to submit documents, including project applications, through a single stimulus mailbox. We also worked very hard to manage the program cycle – that includes things like the project submission eligibility review, recommendations reporting, and payment – by creating an IT solution that was flexible enough to accommodate any changes that would be required as we anticipated application volume.

We also made sure that we were looking at our own timelines and really worked hard to reduce the timelines for review, approval, and payment to municipalities, again, wanting to make sure that we were getting dollars in the hands of municipalities as quickly as we could.

Mr. Reid: Thank you.

One of the other things that was amazing to me that I learned when I started this job was that libraries fall under Municipal Affairs. I believe I'm not the only MLA that was surprised by learning that. Referring to page 15, it indicates that the ministry was looking into potential amendments to the Libraries Act. Can you provide us an update on this consultation and this process?

Ms Cox: Absolutely. Thank you for the question. We did undertake comprehensive stakeholder engagement with key library stakeholders in 2021, and stakeholders did identify a number of modest improvements that could be made to the Libraries Act and the associated regulation to streamline processes and reduce red tape for library services. We are looking forward to and anticipate being able to bring forward amendments that address what we heard from that stakeholder engagement this fall.

Mr. Reid: Thank you.

I'm also asking some questions related to collaboration with Alberta Environment and Parks. Of course, I have lots of landowners in my riding, and I understand that there was work with AEP to look into amending surface rights legislation and amalgamation. Can you update the committee on this process as well?

Ms Cox: Yes. Thank you. This was a collaborative effort between the ministry as well as the Land and Property Rights Tribunal and other departments that you mentioned. The tribunal, of course, is an independent quasi-judicial body that has a limited role in recommending changes to legislation, but the case law does recognize that tribunals have an obligation to identify weaknesses or inconsistencies in the legislation that may result in, maybe, confusion or unnecessary litigation.

We did identify two provisions in the Surface Rights Act that created additional work for operators or maybe caused unnecessary delays to landowners waiting for decisions and payments, so a recommendation was made to Alberta Environment and Parks in consultation with Alberta Justice to amend the surface rights legislation to eliminate these requirements from the legislative process.

We used a similar process, again with extensive collaboration between various ministries, to establish the Land and Property Rights Tribunal Act in 2021. These legislative changes were able to result in a number of efficiencies for Albertans that really made

sure that we were addressing needs and concerns of parties who do appear before the tribunal.

Mr. Reid: Thank you.

Just one last question related to red tape reduction. You know, as I mentioned earlier, the reduction of red tape for my municipalities is incredibly important, so any other initiatives that the department has taken on to further reduce red tape for municipalities and for the province?

Ms Cox: Absolutely. We've done, I think, quite a lot of work. I'm very proud of how seriously the department has taken red tape reduction. We're well above our target, and I, again, am really proud of folks for their creativity and the seriousness with which they took this mandate.

We did do a number of changes to the Municipal Government Act to make sure that we were streamlining requirements for municipalities. Phase 1 was completed in the fall of 2019, and that included streamlining intermunicipal collaboration frameworks and intermunicipal development plans.

9:20

The second phase was completed in the spring of 2020, and this included repealing regulations and reducing the requirements for regional service commissions. Of course, our regional services commissions are a really important way of being able to provide streamlined, cost-effective service delivery by local government.

The third phase was completed in the fall of 2020, and here we made a number of amendments to the Municipal Government Act that were really focused on encouraging development. A really important thing for clients of municipalities was speeding up development-related approvals and really looking to improve efficiencies for business and industry as well as municipalities and all Albertans.

We're in our fourth phase now. It's nearly complete, so looking to be able to introduce amendments in this session. This was looking at more of the governance-related provisions in the MGA. Really, we took a focus around reducing duplication and wanting to make sure, though, that while we're doing that, we are strengthening municipal governments.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy.

We have another hon. member who has joined us, so I'm going to ask the hon. member to introduce himself for the record.

Mr. Loewen: Todd Loewen, MLA, Central Peace-Notley.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Loewen. As you're an independent member, do you have a request for any time here today?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. If I could, I would like to request time to ask a few questions.

The Chair: Okay. We have a request for time from the independent member. We've talked about this at the committee level in the past, that we would entertain that request if independent members came to committee. At that time we had concluded that we would look to the floor for unanimous consent that five minutes be provided to the independent member at the end of our questioning rotations in a way that supplants the three minutes per side fifth rotation requests for written follow-up.

I'm going to look to the floor. I'm going to ask for unanimous consent in order to proceed in that way. Okay. All in favour – sorry. Are there any opposed? That's what I need to ask.

Okay; seeing none, Member Loewen, what we will do is that we have one concluding rotation of nine minutes per side from the

Official Opposition and the government. Then after that, you will have a five-minute rotation.

Now we are moving to the Official Opposition for their nine-minute rotation, please.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the officials for being here today to answer our questions. I'd like to address my questions to pages 82 and 83 of the annual report, specifically performance measure 4(b). This looks at the percentage of residential disaster relief financial assistance files that have received 90 per cent of its estimated funding within 90 days of being determined eligible. As we can see from the report and we look at the past results, in 2017-18, 100 per cent of files were dealt with within that date and time period, 90 per cent of funding, and 94 per cent in 2018-2019. Then we go to 2019-20, and that number drops to 78 per cent.

Then, of course, we see in this annual report a dramatic drop down to 41 per cent, so I have a few questions about that. Within the annual report on page 83 we see a number of, you know, explanations as to why those time periods have changed and why that target wasn't met. We have to note, though, in reference to the pandemic, for example, affecting the timelines and the achievement of results, that the results started to drop significantly even in the year before the pandemic, so it cannot be simply pandemic related.

What we do see, of course, is that there seems to be a change in the payment method right now. Instead of, you know, completing a payment within 90 days, it's now split up over time. For Albertans this is a big concern, right? They're not getting their full payment, and we have no results here to explain the timeliness of that second payment or to know that Albertans actually got the support that they needed when they needed it. Can the ministry explain the decision to do that, to split up the payments, and how Albertans can be assured that they're still getting the disaster relief support that they need?

Ms Cox: Thank you, Madam Chair, for the question. I will ask Stephen Lacroix to supplement and/or correct any of the responses that I provide. Certainly, as the member noted, there was a strategic decision made to essentially change the payment cycle so that we get early payments out as quickly as possible, but we have a simplified eligibility review process at that time. So this does mean in terms of the evaluation that we are looking to balance that streamlined approach to reviewing the applications, getting a payment out, and then doing the full eligibility review subsequent to that. Certainly, I would recognize that in terms of the performance measure something that we may want to consider is how to update the measure so that you can see the full cycle in terms of what that second payment meant.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy. Just before you continue on – thank you. I'm sorry to interrupt, but how do we have any assurance, for example, that that simplified measure – what portion of that payment is now going out in the initial stage? How do we know that Albertans received their full payment that meets their needs within a timely manner? I appreciate going forward, but even for the fiscal year under consideration we don't have any information here as to how much they actually received – did they receive the full 90 per cent? – and how quickly they received it.

Ms Cox: Yes. You're correct that the measure is not nuanced enough to reflect that full payment cycle in terms of: well, at what point did people receive – and I'll just distinguish – not just what they needed but what, in fact, they were eligible for?

Stephen, do you want to talk a bit about the streamlined approach on the eligibility side?

Mr. Lacroix: Absolutely. Thank you, Madam Chair, Deputy. A policy decision was made to get more money out quicker. In terms of more money I'm talking about the total amount. Yes, while this metric would look like we're delivering a suboptimal performance, I would tell you that 50 per cent is actually the number in terms of initial assessment of the value of that uninsurable loss. That goes out as soon as we can make it happen. After that, though, we kind of lose a bit of control as some of the onus then becomes on the property owner to demonstrate the costs, the eligibilities, the negotiations that they would have had with their own insurers, for example. So that's why that process drags on and that the metric doesn't look great. But what I would tell you again is that more money goes out quicker as opposed to: sit and wait and have a hundred per cent certainty on the eligibility of the homeowner, for example.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Lacroix. I appreciate that, but I think what is concerning, though – it's not just that the metric hasn't been adjusted to reflect that timeline; it's that we know that in 2017 100 per cent of eligible applicants got their 90 per cent funding in 90 days. Now we've got no assurances. Now you're actually saying that the onus goes onto the homeowner to determine and sort out with their insurance, so we don't actually know how many Albertans actually got 90 per cent of their funding, even, within a reasonable period of time. Now it's actually – there's nothing in this report to measure that. I don't want to belabour this point because there is a limited amount of time.

I do want to ask about, in terms of the disaster recovery program, the hailstorm in northeast Calgary. As you are aware, this is actually the fourth costliest natural disaster in Canadian history. To date I believe it's \$1.3 billion in costs, yet people in northeast Calgary didn't receive any disaster recovery program funding. They got no support from that, at least not in this fiscal year. That's reflected here in this annual report. Did the ministry at the time put forward any, you know, memo, proposal to cabinet or Treasury Board to request that the northeast hailstorm be considered a disaster and make those folks eligible for funding under the DRP?

Ms Cox: Well, a disaster recovery program, as I mentioned earlier, is meant to support the types of consequences from events where insurance isn't readily available or, potentially, at a reasonable cost. So the reason why a DRP wasn't established for the hail event, where homeowners were impacted, is because, in fact, hail is something that is covered and is reasonably affordable in terms of insurance.

Stephen, did I miss anything on that?

9:30

Mr. Lacroix: No. Exactly. To your point – sorry; through the chair – yes, you're correct that the magnitude of the dollar amount is staggering, but the uninsurable portion of that is nowhere near that billion dollars that you were talking about.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. But, again, in terms of for the people of northeast Calgary: they experienced significant loss and were not able to recover, and many are still struggling to recover. Is there any consideration that's been given by the ministry to adapt its disaster recovery program or any recommendations put forward? We're talking about this – it sounds like red tape, right? If you're an Albertan and you've had this significant damage, you just want to know how you can get support and get payment and recover, and what I'm hearing is: there are technicalities. Has any issue or proposal been put forward to change that to the ministry or to the minister?

Ms Cox: No. A disaster recovery program is only one side of it. Of course, we also, essentially, have costs recovered through the federal government under the disaster financial assistance arrangements. Those guidelines are quite clear in terms of providing support for uninsurable losses, and we would not want taxpayer dollars, essentially, to take the place of private insurance that is available for homeowners, understanding and recognizing, of course, that that is really a terrible event for folks to have to have lived through, but it's not something that they could not have sought insurance for.

Ms Pancholi: I think that's cold comfort to many of the people who live in Calgary-North East.

I want to ask about the changes that you have made to the one-time receipt of disaster recovery program funding. I just want to note that three out of the four biggest natural disasters in Canada's history have occurred in Alberta. You're saying that those people should only be eligible for support . . .

The Chair: Okay. We'll now have the final rotation for the government side. Nine minutes, please.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you very much, everyone, for coming out here today. You know, as much as I was very excited about asking some potential red tape questions, my good friend MLA Reid asked those instead on my behalf, and then my second go-to is always about libraries, and he took all of my thunder on those two, so I'm going to ask some questions about my third main interest, and that really has to do with MSI funding.

Specifically, we're going to talk about page 43. It was reported that \$29.1 million was provided to municipalities and Métis settlements in 2020 and 2021 through the municipal sustainability initiative. Albertans have needed more support during the pandemic, and that has come out very loud and clear in my riding of Spruce Grove-Stony Plain. For this reason, I know, the department has provided more flexibility to municipalities to access these funds as they respond to COVID-19. I guess the first question I have on this is: what are some of the main services that these funds went towards to support Albertans?

Ms Cox: Thank you for the question. In 2020, again, to really look at helping to address the unprecedented financial pressures that municipalities were facing due to the pandemic, municipalities had flexibility to use their MSI operating for any municipal expenditure, subject to the provisions of the Municipal Government Act. So in 2020 the majority of MSI funds in terms of operating were applied to expenses related to general administration, parks, sport and recreation, and libraries.

Mr. Turton: Perfect.

Obviously, you know, the province is very diverse, and as a former city councillor in Spruce Grove I understand it. There are some communities like urban ones, amazing communities like, obviously, mine – I'm slightly biased – or ridings like the riding of Camrose, that I know is an amazing riding as well I always hear about. But I guess my question is: how does the department actually determine the allocation of these funds and spread them out amongst the different municipalities throughout the province? Obviously, like I said, there's a broad and diverse set of needs. You have rural. You have urban. You have, you know, rural, that kind of stuff, so just to kind of get your take on how you divided up the allocation of those funds.

Ms Cox: The 2020 municipal sustainability initiative operating funding was allocated using the standard MSI funding formula. That's based on population, education tax requisition, and kilometres of local roads. In addition – and this gets to recognizing that there are uniquenesses and a broad range of municipalities – there is also a formula part that relates to base funding. This is allocated to all local governments as well as sustainable investment funding, or SI. SI is really meant to support those municipalities that have limited local assessment bases.

In terms of the overall MSI operating budget SI funding is set at \$9 million and is really meant to target municipalities below 10,000 with local assessment that is significantly below the provincial average. I hope that answers your question there.

Mr. Turton: Yes, it does, absolutely.

I'm always interested, obviously, about some of the planning that took place during the pandemic and then potential new steps and how we come about decision-making. Specifically to the pandemic, I know the ministry implemented a new step in the payment process after the MSI capital funding program. Municipalities were asked to indicate whether their allotted funding was being put forward towards new or existing projects so that the ministry might more reasonably manage increased demands on funding. I know this was something, obviously, that was looked at quite favourably by many of my former municipal colleagues from all over the capital region when they kind of talked about perhaps moving forward with better or best practices and things like that. I guess, you know, my question is: what were the results of adding this step, and could this become a standard practice moving forward?

Ms Cox: For sure. The municipal sustainability initiative is our flagship program, very flexible in terms of being able to be used in a variety of ways. So of that \$963 million program budget, about \$175 million in 2020 MSI capital payments for 70 different municipalities was deferred to March 2021 as a result of the new process.

Just to give some background into that step, under the MSI capital program municipalities, as I said, have a lot of flexibility to commit funding for future projects, and that means that sometimes they may not need funds that have been allocated to them until the projects are ready to proceed, and because they've done forward planning, that may not be for maybe one, two, or more years. So we did ask municipalities to indicate whether or not they intended to spend their current year's funding in the short term or at a later date. That makes sure that we are sending municipalities funds when they actually need them. It reduces borrowing costs for the province in cases where municipalities did confirm back to us that they would be able to receive a deferred MSI payment without impacting their project cash flow. So that was a really important principle, understanding what the project cash flow is and making sure that municipalities would have the funds when they actually needed them.

As part of that process, if a municipality's MSI project plans changed throughout the year, again, because the program is so flexible, and they determined that, in fact, they were ready to advance the project and they would need their funding, then they would have the ability – and many did access this – to request the payment be released without being delayed. This was introduced in 2020 really to make sure that we were using funds as prudently as possible.

Mr. Turton: Perfect.

I guess my last question. I want to ask a little bit more about another way that the provincial government was offering support for municipalities during the pandemic, and that's to really deal

with mostly the municipal operating support transfer. Specifically, on page 121 of the annual report it appears that directly incurred expenses for federal grant programs significantly exceeded budget estimates, by nearly \$560 million. Now, I know that this is mostly attributed to the safe restart agreement, which is the funding program put in place to aid municipalities during the pandemic. I guess I was just wondering if you can explain a little bit about the agreement, what it was about, and what type of support did this funding promote?

Ms Cox: Thank you, Madam Chair, for the question. The safe restart agreement between Canada and Alberta provided funding to protect public health and safety and prepare for potential future waves of COVID-19 and make sure that we were really working to establish the safe reopening of economies across Canada. The federal government did provide \$2 billion across the country in support of municipalities as well as up to \$1.8 billion to off-set public transit costs related to the pandemic.

This funding was of course matched equally by provinces. The agreement that was referenced by the member was the result of negotiations between provinces and territories and the federal government in June 2020. Alberta municipalities did receive more than \$600 million for operating costs in transit as part of that safe restart agreement between the federal and provincial governments. In Alberta we were able to match that with \$233 million, matching the federal funding contribution for general operating costs as well as \$70 million for transit. Again, the total, then, was \$606 million.

9:40

To answer the last part of your question, funding was used to support incremental operating costs incurred due to the COVID-19 response and restart as well as operating losses or deficits that may have occurred because of the pandemic's impact on revenues and operations. A good example is on the public transit side. While municipalities with public transit systems received funding to address the reduction in ridership that they were essentially having due to the pandemic, I'll also note that Banff, Jasper, and Canmore also shared an additional \$10 million in recognition of the significant decline in tourism, again as a result of the pandemic.

For the \$560 million increase, \$576.3 million was due to the municipal operating support transfer and \$16.7 million . . .

The Chair: All right. Very good. Thank you, Deputy.

We'll now move to the independent member for five minutes of questions and answers. Please go ahead.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you very much to the committee for giving me unanimous consent to ask some questions, and thanks to the ministry for being here today. As I've only got five minutes, I'll just try to be as quick as I can here. I'm just wondering: is there a process for planning for the minister to leave the country, and are there costs associated with that preparation?

Ms Cox: Thank you. We did receive that question earlier and noted that, generally speaking, if the minister is leaving the country, there would be a process in place, and during the time frame referenced, none of those in attendance were aware of our minister leaving.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. So you are saying that nobody was aware of the minister leaving the country in November 2020 and January 2021?

Ms Cox: That is correct.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Was there any preparation done for a phone plan for the minister to be leaving?

Ms Cox: I was not aware of that. I was not in this role at that time, but I was not aware of that.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Who would have prepared that phone plan change, then?

Ms Cox: I'm not certain who would have done that. The folks who I have with me at the table were not aware and would not have been part of sort of the administration around it, nor were folks that I have in the gallery.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Is there a process in place now for that?

Ms Cox: Sorry. May I may ask you to repeat your question, through the chair?

Mr. Loewen: Is there now a process in place for that eventuality of a minister leaving the country?

Ms Cox: We don't. I mean, ordinarily, of course, if the minister is leaving, we would support them in their departure.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Who covers the ministry while a minister is out of country?

Ms Cox: If there's a delegation in place, that is done via memo, then potentially it's another acting minister of the Crown that would support the ministry in terms of any decision-making that is required. Often and as is the case, if there is a decision that is required, we are always still able to reach our minister. That has been my experience since I've been in this role.

Mr. Loewen: During that time period was there any other minister assigned to take the minister's portfolio if necessary?

Ms Cox: Not that I'm aware of.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Do you know who would be aware of that?

Ms Cox: It's something that we could look into if I may.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Could you undertake that?

Ms Cox: Yes.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you.

Again, on the process, what did you say on the process as far as moving forward? Is there a process in place now?

Ms Cox: The process generally, if there is going to be an absence of decision-making, would be the delegation that I referenced earlier in terms of an acting minister of the Crown being in place and decisions needing to flow to that minister. So that is the process.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. What kind of staffing changes have happened since December 2020, January 2021 within the ministry of staff that may have been aware of this situation?

Ms Cox: I'm sorry. I don't really quite understand your question in terms of staffing changes.

Mr. Loewen: Have there been any staffing changes? You say that neither you nor anybody else that's in the room were aware, but then you also indicated that you weren't in your position at that time. Who was in your position at that time, and are there any other staffing changes that have happened since then?

Ms Cox: I became Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs in May 2021, and prior to my time as deputy minister the deputy minister was Paul Wynnyk, who is now, of course, the Deputy Minister of Health.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you very much.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, hon. member.

I would like to thank officials from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs for attending today and responding to the committee members' questions. We ask that any outstanding questions be responded to in writing within 30 days and forwarded to the committee clerk.

Hon. members, I'll just briefly mention that the draft 2021 annual report of this committee's activities to the Legislative Assembly is forthcoming. It'll be available for members to review at an upcoming meeting.

I'll just look to the floor for any other business, other items for discussion.

Seeing none, the date of our next meeting is Tuesday, April 26, with Executive Council.

Those at the table, please be reminded to remove your own bottles and cups for the safety of LAO staff.

I'll call for a motion to adjourn. Moved by Member Rowswell. All in favour? Any opposed? That motion is carried.

Thank you very much.

[The committee adjourned at 9:47 a.m.]

