



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Legislative Offices

Friday, December 12, 2025
9 a.m.

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Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

Lunty, Brandon G., Leduc-Beaumont (UC), Chair
de Jonge, Chantelle, Chestermere-Strathmore (UC), Deputy Chair

Chapman, Amanda, Calgary-Beddington (NDP)
Cyr, Scott J., Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul (UC)
Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (NDP)*
Dyck, Nolan B., Grande Prairie (UC)
Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC)
Miyashiro, Rob, Lethbridge-West (NDP)
Petrovic, Chelsae, Livingstone-Macleod (UC)
Rowswell, Garth, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright (UC)**
Shepherd, David, Edmonton-City Centre (NDP)
Wright, Peggy K., Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview (NDP)
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UC)***

* substitution for Rob Miyashiro

** substitution for Nolan Dyck

*** substitution for Jacqueline Lovely

Legislative Officers

Kevin Brezinski	Ombudsman, Public Interest Commissioner
Gordon McClure	Chief Electoral Officer
Diane McLeod	Information and Privacy Commissioner
Shawn McLeod	Ethics Commissioner
Terri Pelton	Child and Youth Advocate
W. Doug Wylie	Auditor General

Support Staff

Shannon Dean, KC	Clerk
Trafton Koenig	Law Clerk
Philip Massolin	Clerk Assistant and Executive Director of Parliamentary Services
Nancy Robert	Clerk of <i>Journals</i> and Committees
Abdul Bhurgri	Research Officer
Rachel McGraw	Research Officer
Warren Huffman	Committee Clerk
Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
Aaron Roth	Committee Clerk
Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications
Christina Steenbergen	Supervisor of Communications Services
Amanda LeBlanc	Managing Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

9 a.m.

Friday, December 12, 2025

[Mr. Lundy in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. We'll call this meeting to order. I'd like to welcome members, staff, and guests to this meeting of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices.

My name is Brandon Lundy, MLA for Leduc-Beaumont and chair of the committee. I'd ask that members and those joining the committee at the table introduce themselves for the record.

Mr. Yao: Tany Yao, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo

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

Mr. Cyr: Scott Cyr, MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Ms Wright: Peggy Wright, MLA, Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Shepherd: David Shepherd, MLA, Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Koenig: Trafton Koenig, office of Parliamentary Counsel.

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

Ms Rempel: Good morning. Jody Rempel, committee clerk.

The Chair: All right. I'd now ask those online. We'll go with who I can see first.

MLA Petrovic, please go ahead.

Mrs. Petrovic: Chelsae Petrovic, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod.

The Chair: MLA Chapman.

Ms Chapman: Amanda Chapman, MLA, Calgary-Beddington.

The Chair: And MLA de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Chair. MLA Chantelle de Jonge, Chestermere-Strathmore.

The Chair: All right. Thanks, everyone. For the record I would like to note the following substitutions. Mr. Dach is substituting for Member Miyashiro, Mr. Rowswell for Mr. Dyck, and Mr. Yao for Ms Lovely.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard*, so members do not need to turn them on and off. Committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. We'd ask that members participating remotely ensure they are prepared to speak or vote when called upon, and videoconference participants are encouraged to have their cameras on if possible when speaking. A reminder to please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

We'll move on to our agenda. A draft agenda was circulated. Does anyone wish to propose an amendment? Seeing none, I would ask that a member please move a motion to approve the agenda.

Mr. Yao: Sure.

The Chair: That's moved by MLA Yao. Any discussion? All those in favour? Online? All right. Any opposed? That motion is carried.

We'll move to our next agenda item, which is approval of minutes from the previous meeting. We also have a set of minutes

that were posted. Are there any errors or omissions? Seeing none, would a member like to move a motion to approve the minutes?

Mr. Shepherd: I'll move that, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: All right. That's moved by MLA Shepherd. Any discussion? All those in favour, please say aye. Online? Any opposed? That motion is carried.

We'll turn to our – oh, actually, we'll give MLA Dach a chance to introduce himself for the record.

Mr. Dach: Yeah. Lorne Dach, MLA for Edmonton-McClung. Good morning.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

We'll move to the next item on our agenda, which is the officers of the Legislature decision items, and we'll be beginning with supplementary funding requests. Just for everyone's information, at our meeting on December 5, 2025, the committee received supplementary funding requests from six of the seven offices of the Legislature. We are meeting today to review and make decisions on those requests. The first office on our agenda today is the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner. The Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner has submitted a request for supplementary funding in the amount of \$334,575.

Now we'll turn and ask if there's any discussion on this item. I see Member Cyr.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see a lot of these supplemental items that are before us that we'll likely be supportive of. I'd like to move a motion to start this off, that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the request of the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner for the supplementary funding in the amount of \$334,575 for the 2025-26 fiscal year and that the chair on behalf of the committee forward the request to the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance.

The Chair: Okay. That's the motion moved by MLA Cyr. That is on our screen.

I would now open the discussion on this motion. MLA Shepherd, please go ahead.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would just like to say that I'm in agreement with this motion. Just to note, when we asked her last week, it was very clear; to quote Ms McLeod: "We're already running at a skeleton budget at this point. As I indicated, we did look for what we could save to try and lower the amount. We really don't have room to cut at this point."

I think Ms McLeod was quite clear that her office has done their due diligence. They have made whatever cuts are possible. So I'm in full agreement that we should meet the full request for supplementary funding.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, sir.

Is there any other discussion on this motion? Seeing none, we'll call the question. Would all those in favour of the motion please say aye? Online? Are there any opposed? Hearing none.

That motion is carried.

We'll turn to our second office, which is the Office of the Ombudsman. For those watching, that is a tricky word for me to say so I'll read it a few more times. The Office of the Ombudsman has submitted a request for supplementary funding in the amount of \$58,500. Is there any discussion on the item? I see MLA Shepherd with his hand up.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to move the standard motion that we meet this funding request in full, that is for the amount of \$58,500.

The Chair: If possible, could you please read the motion into the record?

Mr. Shepherd: Certainly, Mr. Chair. I move that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the request from the Office of the Ombudsman for supplementary funding in the amount of \$58,500 for the 2025-26 fiscal year and that the chair on behalf of the committee forward that request to the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

Is there any discussion on this motion? MLA Shepherd, go ahead.

Mr. Shepherd: Yeah. Just to provide my reasoning; again, I think Mr. Brezinski was quite clear when he met with our committee last week. To quote:

We absorbed all the costs that we potentially could. We just would be over budget. We just certainly don't have the budget to manage it at this point . . . Throughout the year we did find lots of cost-saving measures. We reduced travel and training for our staff just to manage our budget effectively.

I would say that Mr. Brezinski and his staff have done their due diligence. They, again, are quite clear that they do not have room in their budget for cuts. Therefore, I support the full funding for the supplementary.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

I see MLA Petrovic has her hand raised. Go ahead, MLA Petrovic.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair. I just want you to mark this day on the calendar; I agree with the opposition on this as well. I think that they have justified their supplemental request during their last presentations, and I'm fully in support of this.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I think we're good unless there's any other discussion?

All right. Seeing none, we will call the vote on this motion. All those in favour in the room, please say aye. Online? Are there any opposed?

That motion is carried.

We can turn now to our next office, which is the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate. The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate has submitted a request for supplementary funding in the amount of \$183,000.

Is there any discussion on this item? MLA Shepherd, please go ahead.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to move the standard motion to approve the supplementary funding request in full, that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the request from the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate for supplementary funding in the amount of \$183,000 for the 2025-26 fiscal year and that the chair on behalf of the committee forward that request to the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance.

If I may just provide my reasoning for that again.

The Chair: Yep. Go ahead.

Mr. Shepherd: Just to note, again, that when Ms Pelton was here, we asked a number of questions about the funding situation for the

office, and she was quite clear that any cuts to funding for that office would have a direct impact on the work they do supporting youth in our province; noting of course that there are two areas in which they work, systemic advocacy and direct advocacy, but noting also that even the systemic advocacy, that is their review of different departments and recommendations they make to government, have a direct impact on direct advocacy and indeed the quality of life and saving the lives of children and youth in our province. Therefore, I am fully in support of meeting the full supplementary funding request.

9:10

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

I see MLA de Jonge with your hand up online. Go ahead.

Ms de Jonge: Thanks, Chair. Yeah. I just wanted to speak briefly in support of this motion. The OCYA justified their supplemental funding request in our previous meeting in their presentation and in answering all of our questions, and this supplemental request is important to ensure the OCYA can continue the important work that they're doing, so I support this motion.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

I would ask if there's any other discussion on this motion.

All right. Seeing none, I will call the question. For those in the room, all those in favour please say aye. Online? Any opposed?

That motion is carried.

We'll now turn to the Office of the Ethics Commissioner. The Office of the Ethics Commissioner has submitted a request for supplementary funding in the amount of \$23,203.29. Is there any discussion on this item?

I see MLA Dach.

Mr. Dach: I'm prepared to submit the standard motion, please.

The Chair: All right. Sounds good. If you'd like to read it into the record, please.

Mr. Dach: I move that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the request from the Office of the Ethics Commissioner for supplementary funding in the amount of \$23,203.29 for the 2025-26 fiscal year and that the chair on behalf of the committee forward the request to the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance.

The Chair: All right. Thank you. Would you like to provide any discussion on this item?

Mr. Dach: It's pretty self-explanatory, sir. It's a very small supplementary amount, and I think it would be incumbent upon this committee to respect that the office is making the request for the small amount and approve it.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

Is there anyone else? I see MLA de Jonge online again. Please go ahead.

Ms de Jonge: Thanks, Chair. I'm just speaking in support of this motion. Again, the Ethics Commissioner justified the supplementary request during their presentation during our last meeting and answered all of our questions. I know the bulk of this request deals with public-sector agreements that impact wages and benefits of the employees of the office. It's important that we approve this to ensure the office can continue the work they do without interruption, so I speak in support of this motion.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

Is there any other discussion on this item? Not seeing any, I'm prepared to call the question. For those in the room, all those in favour of this motion please say aye. Online? Are there any opposed? All right.

That motion is carried.

We are now on the Office of the Auditor General. The Office of the Auditor General has submitted a request for supplementary funding in the amount of \$2,392,000. I would ask if there's any discussion on this item.

I see MLA Cyr has his hand up.

Mr. Cyr: I'd like to move the standard motion, that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the request for the Office of the Auditor General for the supplementary funding in the amount of \$2,392,000 for the '25-26 fiscal year and that the chair on behalf of the committee forward the request to the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance.

The Chair: Okay. I see MLA Shepherd, but did you want to provide comments on that motion, MLA Cyr?

Mr. Cyr: I would. I would. Again, the Auditor General made a compelling case. In November he wasn't quite ready for his supplemental, and we had adjourned that decision until December, today. Now that we have the entirety of his ask, I feel comfortable, along with, I believe, my colleagues, that we can approve the entire request that he's put forward.

In the last meeting, we also had – it was very clear that with this funding he is able to purchase some much-needed software. I fully support that 25-year-old software does need to be updated. I look forward to seeing what our Auditor General can do, him and his good staff.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

MLA Shepherd, your hand is still up.

Mr. Shepherd: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to thank Mr. Cyr for bringing this motion forward. I would just note that a motion had been put forward by government members proposing to not meet the supplementary funding, so I am very pleased to see that so far we have the agreement of at least one government member that we should be providing the full amount that is asked for by the Auditor General.

I would agree with Mr. Cyr that the Auditor General, both in – well, I would disagree, I would say. At the meeting that we had previously in November, I think the Auditor General was quite clear in what he needed and why. I can't say why government members might not have found that clear. I think the Auditor General himself, when he met with us here last time, made it quite clear that they are doing everything they possibly can. Indeed, I don't know that I've ever seen such a level of frustration from a legislative officer, in particular the Auditor General, with what we can only call the failure, I guess, of government members to understand or indeed question the work he is doing or, you know, to call into question the clarity with which he presents to this committee. I think he and his staff go to great efforts, are inordinately clear with us about the work they are doing and why and what they are asking.

In this particular case, this funding is covering, first of all, the salary adjustments, which we have so far covered for all officers through the supplementary funding; of course, as Mr. Cyr noted, the replacement of end-of-life software, which I would also agree is absolutely important and essential to provide that; and thirdly, the agent costs for him to continue with the health entity restructuring

audit. Now, again, that is what he spoke about when he was here in November. I did not have any trouble understanding his clarity at that point about what he needed and why, and he clarified that for us again at our last meeting, that indeed he had external agencies lined up to take on this work, to audit the end-of-life of AHS and these new health entities which the government has created, which is essential work for due diligence on behalf of Albertans, and the contracts were ready to sign.

The choice of government members not to provide that funding, which he made quite clear what he was asking for and why at that time, meant that those contracts had to be delayed, and it means that now he is going to be scrambling to get those contracts back up again and get this work done in time for the provincial deadlines for the overall financial audits. I'm disappointed that he faced that delay that is going to cause this challenge now for doing the due diligence on behalf of Albertans, but I do thank Mr. Cyr for moving this motion to approve it now so this work can go forward.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

Looking for any other speakers on this item. MLA Dach, go ahead.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I, too, share the opinion that the Auditor General was very, very clear in his last meeting. Although I wasn't on the committee for that meeting, I did watch it along with members of the public. As the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul indicated that he didn't quite get why the Auditor General was making the funding request that he was, I for one, along with the public that was watching, could sense very clearly the frustration of the Auditor General in attempting to provide a proper explanation, I thought was very clear in doing so. I'm pleased that the government has seen fit to backtrack on their initial indication that they would deny full funding request, and I support the motion.

9:20

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Cyr: Point of clarity.

The Chair: MLA Cyr, go ahead.

Mr. Cyr: Yeah. Again, we adjourned a motion. We did not reject a motion in that former meeting, just for clarity, so for the record, Mr. Dach, please.

The Chair: Thank you, members. I would maybe ask both sides – certainly, it's important we get our discussion in – you know, if we could keep our comments to the motion at hand. I understand there's always a little bit a history of this stuff, but it'd be helpful to stay on track with the motion as presented here today.

MLA de Jonge, I see your hand is up. Go ahead.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you. I wanted to speak in support of this motion briefly. I'm not sure what the members opposite are referring to since the only motion on the floor is to approve this supplemental funding request. It's important to ensure the office can continue the important work that they do.

Chair, if I may, I'm not going to call a point of order, but I think the chair should warn all committee members to not offend point of order 23(h), which makes false allegations against other members. That's certainly the territory into which we are drifting with the members opposite, so perhaps a warning from the chair would suffice.

Thank you.

The Chair: Well, thanks, MLA de Jong. I think we've had great discussion here. I think we're moving along on our agenda. Thank you for not calling a point of order. I think it's important everyone gets a wide berth to make their points. I'm confident we can all stay respectful and on point and on task here.

MLA Wright, did you have your hand up?

Ms Wright: Yeah, just to echo some of the comments of my colleagues as well. Again, I am very appreciative of the motion that is on the floor for a couple of reasons, first of all, because I was struck, I suppose would be the correct word, by the Auditor General in terms of a couple of key points that he made during his discussions last week. The first was that if the supplemental funding in whole was not granted, there would be some implications in terms of the consolidated financial statements of the entire province. In addition to that, he also talked about the fact that if there was less funding given to him in terms of the supplemental request, then he might not be able to work on the eight new entities for health services in this province. He underscored that by saying, a number of times, to my recollection, that these were audits that his office had been requested to do.

I will admit to being a little concerned thinking that we might not agree to the full supplemental request, so I'm happy to support the motion.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

I don't see anyone else online or in the room, so I think we can call this question. In the room, all those in favour, please say aye. Online? All right. Are there any opposed? All right.

This motion is carried.

Let's see if I can turn my page and get to the right office that we're on. Now we will be discussing the Elections Alberta supplemental request. MLA Chapman, I see that your hand is up. Please go ahead.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Out of an abundance of caution I'm going to recuse myself from this portion of the meeting and the vote. I plan to log out of the meeting, and I will return when we have completed the portion on the chief electoral office.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, MLA Chapman.

MLA Shepherd, is this a comment on the procedure?

Mr. Shepherd: No, Mr. Chair. I wish to make a motion.

The Chair: I'd like to be able to read the information into the record.

Mr. Shepherd: Certainly, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: This is our Elections Alberta discussion. Elections Alberta has submitted a request for supplementary funding in the amount of \$9,964,082.

We will now open it to discussion. Go ahead, MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to make the standard motion to provide the full funding requested by Elections Alberta in the amount of \$9,964,082.

The Chair: Did he just read it?

Mr. Shepherd: Yes. I can read it into the record, Mr. Chair, that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the request from the office of the Chief Electoral Officer for supplementary funding in the amount of \$9,964,082 for the 2025-26 fiscal year and that the chair on behalf of the committee forward the request to the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance.

The Chair: All right. Would you like to speak to the motion?

Mr. Shepherd: Yes. If I could motivate. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think we had some substantive discussion with the Chief Electoral Officer around the duties, and let's be clear about what he's requesting here. First of all, there's \$226,853 for salary adjustment, which is what we have met for every legislative officer so far today.

We had a request for \$2,222,101 for verification of seven additional petitions for recall, and we had quite a, I think, robust discussion with the Chief Electoral Officer around this where he talked through the process, recognizing the fact that as soon as that request is received, his office begins to incur expenses, again recognizing that at a previous meeting in November he made the request and members on the government's side chose to reduce that amount by a considerable amount. So there are expenses that the Chief Electoral Officer had from that point. Now, we will recognize, of course, that the Chief Electoral Officer did come back and provide, you know, some clarity that once they had actually been through the process, in fact, they needed less than they had asked. So these are the amounts, then, that have been reduced, recognizing the work that was done on the Forever Canadian citizens' initiative petition with that understanding on these recall petitions, also recognizing that there is significant work that has to go into this and there are going to be additional recall petitions.

There is also then the additional event preparation and readiness funding in the amount of \$3,070,926. Again, Mr. McClure was quite clear. Any funds that are not used for the specific work for which he has outlined and made the request will be returned. These are not dollars that are being given and simply cast, you know, randomly or spent or wasted. Mr. McClure and his staff are doing the best they can in what is a new process that was imposed on them by government without a lot of consultation or opportunity for them to look at these expenses ahead of time. I think Mr. McClure has been quite transparent in coming back, providing more clarity, providing better numbers when they were available.

I believe that, you know, this is the legislation that's been written. This is the work that is imposed on Mr. McClure. He does not have a choice in fulfilling it, so I do not see any reason to provide additional stress and uncertainty for him and his staff in simply trying to follow through on what has been given to them by government to fulfill. That is my reason for moving the motion for funding in full.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

I see MLA Petrovic online. Go ahead.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate you calling on me. You know, sometimes it's difficult to see us online, but appreciate it nonetheless.

I just want to say that I do support this motion as well. I know that last week when it came to the supplemental funding some of my concerns were alleviated with that, so I fully support this motion for the supplemental funding of \$9,964,082. That's a large number that we're about to approve. You know, I think approving this funding for election readiness is going to allow Elections Alberta to begin the necessary work for the upcoming general election and possible referendums that we're looking at. Just, once again – mark the day on the calendar – I agree.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Petrovic.

Is there anyone else who wants to speak to this motion? MLA de Jong, I see your hand is up. Please go ahead.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Chair. I just want to speak in support of the supplemental funding request. I believe our questions were answered in the last meeting. This supplemental for the rest of the fiscal year is going to help Elections Alberta with election readiness and begin the necessary work that they need to do for an upcoming general election, a possible referendum as well as the verification processes for the signature portions of the recalls and the citizens' petition, so I fully support this motion.

9:30

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA de Jonge.
MLA Wright, I see your hand up. Go ahead.

Ms Wright: Thank you. I will be brief, Chair. A couple of things that, again, I recall from the discussion last week with Mr. McClure was that he said a number of times that should his office not receive this supplemental funding, what that would mean, because they have already incurred these costs, depending upon whether it's an election event, if it's a referendum, which of course is an event throughout the entire province, whether it is a recall petition: all of those things mean that costs incur from the moment that they start. Should we not grant the supplemental funding, it would mean that his office would then go into being encumbered, he called it, which to me meant that they would essentially be carrying over a negative balance from year to year to year and then would have to sort of make arrangements to deal with that encumbrance.

Knowing that at some point in the next couple of years we will indeed have a general election, that may very well mean that we wouldn't have enough funds for this really important office, Elections Alberta, to actually run the election in an appropriate way, the way that they are supposed to. I think that would mean that Albertans might lose a little bit of trust in the electoral process. I certainly would not want this particular office to be encumbered in any way, so, again, supportive of the motion.

The Chair: All right.
MLA Dach, go ahead.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Perhaps in the spirit of the season, we've seen a very timely conversion on the road to Damascus. It's been a stunning reversal from what the government had proposed earlier, to basically cut by a third the funding request made by Elections Alberta, so I'm pleased that this has happened. But I can say that it's most likely as a result of the political pressure that they were feeling should they have gone ahead with this drastic cut, and we're grateful that the public has gotten to the members on the government side to convince them of the wisdom of this new-found enlightenment.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right.
MLA Cyr.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you. I would like to correct for the record that we support our Elections Commissioner, and we support the office on the good work that they're doing, but during the meeting we found out that he was looking for \$1.1 million per recall election, which would have equated today to about \$23.1 million. To return back the vast majority of that didn't make sense, and I'm glad to see that the Elections Commissioner brought back a budget that looks like it's going to go unanimously through this committee. So there wasn't a cut; what it is was, well, we needed him to go back and look at what he was presenting. He did, and we accept that in its entirety.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Cyr.

It looks like – oh, MLA Petrovic. Is that a new hand?

Mrs. Petrovic: Yes. Thank you, Chair. If you don't mind, just to go on MLA Cyr's point. When the elections officer first came to us asking for a million dollars for each recall verification, he did come back to us with that revised number of \$317,500 per recall verification. Looking at other jurisdictions, this is a much more reasonable number, so I stand by holding off.

There was never a chance of not funding him; it was just that, at that moment in time, the numbers needed to be looked at and obviously for good reason. When we're talking about taxpayers' dollars, you know, we're looking at – he came back with almost a third of the amount. So it wasn't about not funding this individual. It was about making sure that the dollars were being spent appropriately, and looking at how this has played out, going from \$1 million to \$317,000 per recall verification, I'm very happy where the government has stood in making sure that we are appropriately spending some of these dollars. Like my colleague had said, this looks like it's going to be passed unanimously for the supplemental budget.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Petrovic.

Seeing no other hands, I am prepared to call the question. In the room all those in favour of the motion, please say aye. Online? All right. Are there any opposed? Seeing none opposed. It must be the season.

This motion is unanimously passed and carried.

All right. At the discretion of the chair, I'm going to ask that we take a quick five-minute break before we move on to our next agenda item, where we will be considering budget estimates for these offices for the '26-27 fiscal year.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 9:35 a.m. to 9:40 a.m.]

The Chair: All right. Welcome back. As I mentioned before we broke, we are now moving on to the next item on our agenda, which is budget estimates for '26-27. We will now move on to the '26-27 budget estimates received from the seven offices of the Legislature.

Once again we will begin with the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner. The office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner submitted a budget estimate for '26-27 in the amount of \$10,656,408. I'd ask if there's any discussion on this matter. I see MLA Cyr with his hand up.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to move a motion that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices amend the proposed budget estimates of the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner for the fiscal year '26-27 in the amount of \$10,656,408 to a revised amount of \$10,275,825, approve the estimates as amended, and that the chair, on behalf of the committee, forward the request to the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance.

The Chair: Okay. That was read into the record, right? Even though it's not on the screen.

Ms Rempel: Yes.

The Chair: Perfect.

MLA Cyr, if you'd like to provide some discussion on the motion.

Mr. Cyr: Again, when it comes to the position that the government of Alberta is in, we're looking at a \$6.5 billion deficit for this upcoming year. I know that the government of Alberta is looking to, or asking our ministries to, find savings of 5 per cent. Right now we've got an increase in budget of the Privacy Commissioner of about 15 per cent in this ask. We are reducing the amount of ask to 11 per cent. We believe that it is very reasonable. It is still far more than what the last year's budget was, and 95 per cent of the funding request is something that I think all of our government ministries and commissioners should be able to meet.

Now, this is a significant increase, and it does exceed the increases that the committee approved in the last two years. Not only is this increase still in line with what we were giving in the last two years; it is still ensuring that there's adequate funding for the commissioner to be able to meet her duties.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Cyr.
MLA Shepherd, I saw your hand up.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am disappointed to see this motion from the government member. Again, Ms McLeod was quite clear when she presented to this committee: "We're already running at a skeleton budget at this point. As I indicated, we did look for what we could save to try and lower the amount. We really don't have room to cut at this point." She was quite clear that the only thing that they have the option to do is to cut staff, is to not fill positions.

We already know this office is struggling. They are dealing with a great deal of changes in legislation that were brought forward by this government, a government that has had to be investigated multiple times by the Information and Privacy Commissioner, so making the work more difficult. Again, to quote further: "In fact, you know, we already struggle with doing the work that we do with the resource capacity that we have, and if I were to have to cut an additional resource out of my workforce, it would certainly make it more difficult." Further: "We really don't have much to carve out. If I were to have to absorb \$300,000" – and in this case, let's be clear. What the member, Mr. Cyr, is proposing is a cut of about \$400,000.

Again:

If I were to have to absorb \$300,000, that's quite a bit of money, considering my budget is actually not that big compared to, say, the Auditor General's budget, for example. We would have to look very carefully at what we could do, and it actually could result in staff layoffs at this point.

The OIPC, Mr. Chair, serves Albertans, Albertans who are trying to access information about their government. This is a key part of the process to holding government to account. Let's be very clear. When this member, Member Cyr, talks about, you know, fiscal due diligence, as has been noted by folks like conservative columnist Rob Breakenridge, this government has vastly increased spending at a rate far higher than the previous government in a much shorter period and is still running a deficit at a time when they have three times the royalty revenue.

This is not putting any motives or any impetus on Mr. Cyr, but this kind of a cut, frankly, just feels petty and performative. It accomplishes nothing. It is a drop in the bucket of the provincial budget at a time when the government itself is going for further extravagance like paying salaries now to parliamentary secretaries and others. It is spending more for its interests, but on the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, whose sole purpose is to serve the people of Alberta, the government is making a cut that

the commissioner has been very clear is going to directly impact and damage the ability of that office to do their work.

Now, Mr. Cyr also talked about, you know, the fact that the government has been requesting these cuts over previous years so it is generous that the government this year is now meeting 11 per cent when it has held the office – Mr. Chair, this is precisely why we are seeing this request for such a significant increase this year. Members from the government have continually cut in previous years and refused to meet the funding requests. When you do that, you eventually reach a point where you have cut to the bone, and the commissioner is quite clear that we are at that point now.

I'm sorry. I don't look across the way and say: how kind, how generous of these government members. I see this as a lack of due diligence to ensure that Albertans are able to receive the services that they need.

I will be voting against this motion. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: All right. I see MLA Petrovic with your hand up online. Please go ahead.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair. I just heard the member opposite talk about cuts. I lost count on how many times he said that we're cutting this budget. I just want to reiterate that we are increasing this budget 11 per cent from last year. What we are doing right now is we are just asking that offices look at a 5 per cent savings in what they're doing. This isn't a cut. This is an 11 per cent increase. There is no cut sitting here. We are not asking them to cut their budget. We are increasing their budget by 11 per cent, and I just need to clarify that.

There are significant increases that this committee has approved over the last two years. Once again, we're increasing this budget by 11 per cent. I just want to clarify this for the members opposite to maybe be mindful of their words. There is no cutting. I think I'm going to just keep saying that there is no cutting as many times as they're saying that we are cutting. We are giving them an 11 per cent increase.

That is all, Chair.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Petrovic.

I have MLA Shepherd in the room, but I'm going to go to MLA Chapman first online. Go ahead.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Chair. Just hearing the comment from the other committee member, I think that I would just like to clarify, from my perspective, on cuts. What we're talking about here is this office having to cut staff. That is the result of not approving the funding request. Now, this government has approved salary increases, and this is across all of these offices. The increases in budget that they are looking for are to cover government-approved salary increases, and the result at this committee, if we do not decide to approve the amounts requested, is going to be a cut. It's going to be a cut in the workforce, which means a reduction in services that this office will be able to offer to Albertans. I just want to be as clear as the member who spoke before me that, yes, we absolutely are talking about a cut here. We're talking about a cut in the service level that this office is able to provide.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will not be supporting this motion.

9:50

The Chair: All right. MLA Shepherd, go ahead.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just want to echo what MLA Chapman just said. I want to be absolutely clear here. About, you know, 30 minutes ago we approved a supplementary funding request for this office to backfill for the last year, again, in part

because government members last year chose not to provide the funding that was requested by the Information and Privacy Commissioner to cover salary increases and other pieces, and then, of course, there was a further salary increase that came during the year. We approved a supplementary funding increase of \$334,575, and now the government members are proposing to cut \$413,000 approximately, so we are obliterating the supplementary funding request that we just provided, essentially zeroing it out and then taking away an additional \$100,000, when the Information and Privacy Commissioner was very, very clear that even \$300,000 would have a significant impact on the ability of her office to do the work.

Mr. Chair, I just want to be very clear. This is not irresponsibility on the part of these officers, okay? This is not a failure of them to do their duty, to step up. They have been very, very clear that they have been doing exactly and precisely that. When the government chooses to increase the workload through changes in legislation, to put more responsibilities on the commissioner and her office on top of salary increases – I will disagree with Mrs. Petrovic – when you increase workload and you increase the work and then you refuse to provide the dollars that are required to meet that, that, in fact, ends up being a cut, much as when you don't increase education funding to cover the amount of new students, that also then becomes a cut. You increase responsibilities, you increase work, refuse to provide the resources that are needed to cover it: it's effectively a cut.

This is going to mean that Albertans will receive less service, have less ability to hold their government to account. Certainly, we do not impute motives at this committee, but I'll just note that refusing to provide the resources makes it harder to hold the government to account.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: MLA Wright, go ahead.

Ms Wright: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm going to get into a little bit of nitty-gritty here because folks have been talking about previous budgets and that sort of thing. I do want to underscore the point that the bulk of the budget increase has to do with salaries that, quite frankly, were timely. But aside from that, we heard from folks earlier about that issue that they are absolutely cut to the bone at this point. They don't have anywhere else that they can cut other than to potentially lay off staff. They already have a very small team, and that small team's work is important to this province because it very much speaks to the trust that Albertans have in the government and in everything that the government might be providing or not providing in the way of information in a timely manner.

We recently had the Auditor General's report out that, again, talked about the fact that on occasion government officials are less than open to providing the information that they are supposed to be providing.

Nonetheless, I just want to point out here that when you compare the '25-26 budget with the '26-27 estimates for contract services, they are only asking for an additional \$3,000. Technology services, which, of course, is a big one: they're asking for about \$100,000 extra, but she fully explained that. They need to bring everything up to standard. Materials and supplies is going down by \$10,000. Travel: staying exactly the same. Communications: exactly the same. And miscellaneous, all those sorts of extra things, are actually going down by over \$10,000. This office is doing absolutely what it can in the very most responsible way that it possibly can to ensure that it is there for Albertans.

The commissioner also noted that right now backlog is down in terms of all of the cases that are coming in, all those people who are asking for assistance, but she was also very clear that that backlog will rise. She also very much pointed out that the budget presented to us was the minimum required to meet their business plan for the next year. That's the minimum required. There is nowhere else to cut other than, as folks have said, with salaries.

Again, Chair, this will end with a reduction of Albertans' trust in this government. I will not be supporting this.

The Chair: All right. Oh, MLA Petrovic, do you have anything, or should we call the question?

Mrs. Petrovic: Sorry. My apologies, Chair. I didn't mean to raise my hand.

The Chair: All right. I will call the question on this motion. For those in the room, all those in favour of the motion, please say aye. Online? All right. In the room, any opposed to the motion? Online? All right.

That motion is carried.

Mr. Shepherd: Recorded vote, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: All right. A recorded vote has been requested. Those in the room who are in favour of the motion, please raise your hands.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have Mr. Yao, Mr. Rowswell, and Mr. Cyr.

The Chair: All right. Those in the room who are opposed to the motion, please raise your hands.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have Mr. Dach, Mr. Shepherd, and Ms Wright.

The Chair: All right. For those members participating remotely, please turn on your cameras and microphones if you wish to vote. When the committee clerk calls your name, please indicate whether you are in favour or against the motion.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mrs. Petrovic.

Mrs. Petrovic: In favour.

Ms Rempel: I see Ms de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: In favour.

Ms Rempel: I see Ms Chapman

Ms Chapman: Opposed.

Ms Rempel: Mr. Chair, I have five in favour and four against.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

That is carried.

We will turn to our next office, which is the office of the Ombudsman. The office of the Ombudsman submitted a budget estimate for '26-27 in the amount of \$5,650,260.

As for discussion, I see MLA Cyr with his hand up. Go ahead.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you. I'd like to move a motion, Mr. Chair, that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices amend the proposed budget estimates for the office of the Ombudsman for the fiscal year '26-27 in the amount of \$5,650,260 to a revised amount of \$5,433,105, approve the estimates as amended, and

that the chair, on behalf of the committee, forward the request to the President of the Treasury Board and the Minister of Finance.

The Chair: All right. MLA Cyr, would you like to speak to the motion?

Mr. Cyr: Yes. Again, I see the good work that our Ombudsman is doing. When it comes to pressures on all budgets throughout the government right now, we're clearly seeing that a \$6.4 billion, \$6.5 billion deficit by the government of Alberta is something that we need to manage. This is one of those things. The Ombudsman's office has asked for an almost 17 per cent increase in budget. I believe that there are some savings, and we moved it to 95 per cent of what he is requesting, to a 13 per cent increase in his budget. This is a very reasonable amount for us to be moving forward.

I will say that, being mindful of the economic times, we need to be ensuring that we're good stewards of the taxpayers' dollars that they're making, and managing even the nickels and dimes, if you will, the smaller parts, is important for the government of Alberta. The opposition had stated that, really, it's immaterial in the budget for the last one. I would suggest that we all need to do our part, including our commissioners. I know that this commissioner will find a way to be able to find those savings and be able to deliver those services.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

10:00

The Chair: Thank you.

MLA Wright, go ahead.

Ms Wright: Thank you, Mr. Chair. A couple of things. The first thing is, like our previous discussion, this reduction of about 200-plus thousand dollars completely obliterates the amount of money that we just awarded them in the supplementary request.

Mr. Shepherd: Four times, yeah.

Ms Wright: Four times the amount, as my colleague has just pointed out. Being stewards of taxpayer funds, I completely understand that that is our job. We are here to ensure that these independent offices of the Legislature are indeed expending funds in the most prudent way possible. But the other part of that though, Mr. Chair, that prudence needs to extend again into – we also need to think about the very important work that all of these different offices are doing and the office of the Ombudsman indeed does an awful lot of important work.

In order to do that important work, Mr. Brezinski talked about the fact that they have done nothing but reductions. They've reduced management of supplies and services. They've reduced travel and training for staff, and I would argue that on occasion that training for staff is exactly what should be happening in order to do the very good work that we would want them to continue to do. They've reduced advertising. They didn't have any vacancies over the last year. They've absorbed what they can. They cannot absorb any more. They talked about cutting out costs for legal expenditures. They have done exactly what we would have wanted them to do, and certainly in his budget document he uses the word "austerity". This is an austerity budget.

Again, I would say that this is a budget that is required to do the minimum; not the maximum, but the minimum. This is the minimum required in order to do the work that the office is legislatively required to do. While it may not seem, perhaps, like an awful lot of money, it is an awful lot of money when you're dealing with a budget this size. Again, I talk about the trust of Albertans. This office, much like the others that we're talking about today, that

bottom line – do Albertans trust the government? The work that this office does very much speaks to that. To cut the \$200,000, not only obliterating what we just gave them, I think will, again, have an impact on their work, which means Albertans will wonder, in fact, if they can actually trust this government.

The Chair: All right, I have a couple online. Thank you, MLA Wright.

We'll go to MLA Petrovic.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair. I just wanted to note once again that the funding that we are proposing today represents an increase of 13 per cent over last year's budget; so this is an increase of 13 per cent over last year. These independent offices' budgets are increasing at a higher level than the ministries, and the ministries provide direct core services to Albertans. The requested increase is more than inflation and adjustments plus population, which is the government's benchmark.

I just wanted to clarify, like, you know, office of the Ombudsmen, which is a tricky word – Chair, I know that you appreciate that – they do great work. They do wonderful work. This is why we are increasing their budget by 13 per cent over last year. I just wanted to clarify, once again, that this is not a cut; this is an increase of 13 per cent. We know, looking forward into the future of Alberta, we're asking for everyone to find some savings. Still, yet again, 13 per cent over last year; the requested increases are far more than what the government's benchmarks are, which is inflation adjustments plus population. We just need to continuously reiterate that this is an increase in their budget from last year.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

MLA Chapman, please go ahead.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Chair. I would just like to clarify again for the committee that, yeah, this is a cut on the requests for the office of the Ombudsman. If you take a look at the budget documents, you can see that about 93 per cent of their budget is used on salary, and of course it was this government who negotiated the salary increase to the public service. That's exactly what we were approving in the supplemental funding for all of these offices.

I'm going to say this. I think on every office, Mr. Chair – I don't think that everyone here is understanding this – the supplementary funding was to cover the increases in salary as a result of the government's negotiated settlement with the public sector. I'm just feeling a little confused. I'm not understanding. With one hand the government said: yeah, we approve this salary. Now with the other hand the government members of this committee are saying: oh, but no; we're not actually going to approve you the money to pay for the salaries that we agreed we would increase. It's completely nonsensical, and obviously I will not be supporting this motion.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Chapman.

MLA Shepherd, go ahead.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will be brief, just a couple of things I wanted to add to the record. Just the quote from Mr. Brezinski when he was here at committee:

We absorbed all the costs that we potentially could. We would just be overbudget. We... certainly don't have the budget to manage it at this point.

That's the salary increase, which was part of the supplementary funding request of \$58,500, which has just been obliterated by this cut, which is four times that amount.

He was quite clear in the work they had done.

We definitely reduced our management of supplies and services.

This is me quoting Mr. Brezinski.

We reduced travel and training for our staff, just the very core training that we . . . provided . . . so they were [very] diligent in that regard. We reduced advertising. We did have a budget for advertising as well in order to get the word out about our office, so we reduced that.

I will say that we just recently saw a sole-source contract from this government advertising against teachers at a cost of \$300,000, \$100,000 more than the amount these members are proposing to cut from this office. Mr. Brezinski did due diligence in cutting advertising.

To continue to quote:

Throughout the year we did find lots of cost-saving measures. We reduced travel and training for our staff just to manage our budget effectively.

In my view, Mr. Brezinski has done due diligence. He has done his work.

The government, frankly, because members are bringing up that our government is trying, our government is doing – no. The Premier's office increased the budget. Cabinet is increasing budget by paying parliamentary secretaries the pay of – the pay increase for two parliamentary secretaries could dwarf the amount that's being cut here. I can't take that from these members. No. This government is not doing due diligence. It is taking more money where it wants it and denying it where Albertans need it. I will not be supporting this motion.

The Chair: All right. I'm prepared to call this question. I think we start with those in the room. All those in favour, please say aye. Online? All right. All those opposed in the room? Online?

That motion is carried.

Mr. Shepherd: Recorded vote, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: All right. We have a request for a recorded vote. Those in the room who are in favour of the motion, please raise your hands.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mr. Yao, I see Mr. Rowswell, and I see Mr. Cyr.

The Chair: All right. Those in the room who are opposed to the motion, please raise your hand.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mr. Shepherd and I see Ms Wright and I see Mr. Dach.

The Chair: All right. For those members participating remotely, please turn on your cameras and microphones if you wish to vote. When the committee clerk calls your name, please indicate whether you are in favour or against the motion.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mrs. Petrovic.

Mrs. Petrovic: In favour.

Ms Rempel: I see Ms de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: In favour.

Ms Rempel: And I see Ms Chapman.

Ms Chapman: Opposed.

Ms Rempel: Mr. Chair, I have five in favour and four against.

The Chair: All right.

That motion is carried.

We'll move on to the office of the Public Interest Commissioner. The office of the Public Interest Commissioner submitted a budget estimate for '26-27 in the amount of \$1,666,760. Is there any discussion on this matter?

I want to play fair online. I see MLA Petrovic has a hand raised.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair. I just wanted to go ahead and move a motion for discussion. I move that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices amend the proposed budget estimates for the office of the Public Interest Commissioner for the fiscal year of 2026-2027 in the amount of \$1,668,760 to a revised amount of \$1,616,000, approve the estimates as amended and that the Chair, on behalf of the Committee, forward the request to the President of the Treasury Board and Minister of Finance.

10:10

The Chair: All right.

MLA Petrovic, would you like to speak to the motion?

Mrs. Petrovic: Yeah, absolutely. Once again, you know, this committee here: we've talked about it when we're looking at our leg. offices and these public interests. The funding we're proposing today represents an increase of 7 per cent over last year's budget. You know, the office of the Public Interest Commissioner does wonderful work. We intend to fund them an additional 7 per cent over what we gave them last year, and the officer's additional requests have also been granted. So this is a significant increase that the committee has approved over the last two years, and once again, we are just asking them for that 5 per cent in savings.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right.

I do see some hands in the room, but I'm going to go to MLA Chapman first. Please go ahead.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Chair. Just to clarify, again, that the budget amount that's being approved here will not be sufficient to cover the salary increases that were approved by this government. The Public Interest Commissioner was very clear on the record. When we asked about the increase to the budget being due to the salary increases required by the public service, the response was, "Yes, the salary adjustment as well as a tiny merit increase. There are only seven people within the Public Interest Commissioner . . . so a huge chunk of that is the salary adjustment. Yes."

I just want to make sure that we're clear on the record here that, once again, the government members of this committee are unwilling to provide the funding that this office requires to fulfill the increases that the government had approved on public service. I will not be supporting this motion.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Chapman.

MLA Dach, I think I saw your hand.

Mr. Dach: Yeah. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I wanted to make note that the government members have repeatedly referred to an arbitrary yardstick to justify lower amounts and argue for reductions in the budget estimates by suggesting that the government has implemented a 5 per cent reduction request across the board and has looked for savings from ministries; therefore, committee members are expected to follow those marching orders in committee. Another arbitrary yardstick that they're attempting to justify here is using the population and inflation measure, which the government is using to justify reductions in ministry budgets.

I'd like to suggest, Mr. Chair, that this committee has an independent nature about it and it is expected to make recommendations

to government, not necessarily follow the beck and call of government. We're supposed to make recommendations to the Legislature given our deliberations here and our interpretation of what the request for funding has been from the various legislative officers. Applying this arbitrary yardstick does no justice to the presentations made to this committee by the legislative officers, including the Public Interest Commissioner who, once again, has looked at the budget that they have in front of them for the upcoming fiscal year and suggested that this was a number that was arrived at given very, very sharp pencils, and we suggest that the number should be respected.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Dach.

Are there others wishing to join the debate on this motion? MLA Cyr, go ahead.

Mr. Cyr: I'd like to support my colleague MLA Petrovic in this motion. Again, we're looking at a \$6.4 billion to \$6.5 billion deficit this year. I understand the opposition's willingness to just give our commissioners whatever they ask. If this ask would have been 50 per cent, it sounds like they would approve that.

They had come in with a 10 per cent increase in budget for this office, and we have accepted a 7 per cent increase to this. To phrase this as a cut is absurd, and continuing to repeat the word "cut," just hoping that it becomes true, is absurd. We also gave the Ombudsman a 13 per cent increase in his budget as well.

I expect that all of our ministries will find savings for our taxpayers because running deficits of this magnitude is something we need to take seriously even if the opposition seems to see that there is no ability to find savings for the government of Alberta, for our commissioners. I believe there is the ability, and 95 per cent of their budget has been approved and increased from the last year.

Just to reiterate, I fully support and will vote yes for my colleague MLA Petrovic.

The Chair: Thank, MLA Cyr.

MLA Shepherd, I saw your hand up. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just to respond to Mr. Cyr, absolutely, I would love to see this government reduce spending and bring down that \$6 billion deficit. Indeed, some excellent ways to do that would be not to waste hundreds of millions of dollars on useless contracts in health care that are going to friends and supporters of this government, would have been to save \$125 million by not having wasted the time and the dollars that they did on trying to privatize lab services.

Let's be clear. Those amounts dwarf these minimal requests from these officers of the Legislature, who are in fact providing direct services to Albertans and have repeatedly on the record outlined the due diligence they have done. It's incredibly disingenuous for government members to suggest that it's the officers of the Legislature that are putting us in a position where we have a multibillion-dollar deficit, especially when government is increasing spending in many areas where they feel it benefits themselves.

I will not be supporting this motion.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Shepherd.

Looks like we are ready to call this question. I would ask for all those in favour of this motion, please say aye. Any online? All right. All those opposed to the motion? Online?

That motion is carried.

Mr. Shepherd: Recorded vote, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I had assumed so. I was surprised there.

All right. A recorded vote has been requested. Those in the room who are in favour of the motion, please raise your hands.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mr. Rowsell, I see Mr. Yao, and I see Mr. Cyr.

The Chair: All right. Those in the room who are opposed to the motion, please raise your hands.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mr. Dach, Mr. Shepherd, and Ms Wright.

The Chair: All right. For those members participating remotely, please turn on your cameras and microphones if you wish to vote. When the committee clerk calls your name, please indicate whether you are in favour or against the motion.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mrs. Petrovic.

Mrs. Petrovic: In favour.

Ms Rempel: I see Ms de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: In favour.

Ms Rempel: I see Ms Chapman.

Ms Chapman: Opposed.

Ms Rempel: Mr. Chair, I have five in favour and four against.

The Chair: All right.

That motion is carried.

We will now turn our attention to the office of the Child and Youth Advocate. The office of the Child and Youth Advocate submitted a budget estimate for '26-27 in the amount of \$18,734,000.

I'm now open to any discussion on this matter. MLA Petrovic, you're quick on the draw today. I see your hand up. Go ahead.

Mrs. Petrovic: I am back home down south, so we need to be quick on the draw.

Chair, I would just like to move a motion already that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices amend the proposed budget estimates for the office of the Child and Youth Advocate for the fiscal year of 2026-2027 in the amount of \$18,734,000 to a revised amount of \$18,219,000, approve the estimates as amended, and that the chair, on behalf of the committee, forward the request to the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance.

10:20

The Chair: All right, we now have that on the screen. Thank you for reading it into the record. MLA Petrovic, would you like to provide some comments on the motion?

Mrs. Petrovic: Yeah. Once again, Chair, you know, as we're looking at the funding proposal, we are looking at a funding proposal that represents an increase of 8 per cent over last year's budget. I'm not going to say how this vote is or isn't going to go, but we intend to approve 95 per cent of the funding request for salaries, wages, and benefits and are asking the independent officers to find some saving in their budgets to account for 5 per cent of what we're looking at. Once again, the officers' additional requests have been granted. Once again, it's a significant increase that exceeds the increase this committee approved over the last two

years. My same rationale has gone for the last few motions that we've made.

Thank you for that.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Petrovic.

I think I saw MLA Wright with your hand up.

Ms Wright: Thank you, Chair. It won't surprise you that I will be speaking against this motion for a couple of reasons. The first is – and I'm going to use the word "cut" again, Mr. Cyr. Sorry about that. But it is indeed a cut. It's a \$515,000 cut from their budget ask. Again, the advocate was exceptionally clear with us that this is one of those budgets that is the minimum amount required. In fact, she did note that over the last five years they've held a portion of the budget exactly the same – exactly the same for the last five years – so they have done exactly what one would expect that an organization that is engaged in a practice of fiscal prudence, if you will, would be doing. They have absolutely done that.

To note as well, she's talked about how if there was indeed a cut in the budget, they would first look to the office itself. But then she also pointed out that just because they're looking at the office, which, of course, means people, Mr. Chair, doesn't mean there won't be a direct impact on the extraordinarily important work that this particular group does.

We had some really lovely discussions last week about that very important work, and both folks from our side and folks from the other side recognized, Mr. Chair, the very important work that the Child and Youth Advocate does. It's about protecting children. It's about telling their stories. It's about, hopefully, learning from the experiences of some of those kids who are in care so that we can learn to do better on their behalf.

She was asked very directly: what will the impact be? She talked about the fact that the bulk of their operational expense is on that piece called direct advocacy. If we are proposing taking \$500,000 out of the budget for this organization over the next year, then I would say that there will be some children that will not be served by this government that deserve to be served, Mr. Chair, and deserve to have their stories told.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Wright.

I see MLA Chapman with your hand up online. Please go ahead.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just want to read a quote from the advocate in the meeting where she presented her budget, where she said, "We looked really hard at what was the very minimum amount that we could manage with these really high increases that were negotiated or that the public service brought in."

So, yes, I am making the same point I've made on every other office, which is that the bulk or the majority of this increase is related to the negotiated salaries as a part of the public service. I maintain my confusion as to how the government members of this committee don't understand that they have a commitment to actually fulfill those mandated increases, that if you do not fund these offices to pay for those salary increases, the offices, due to the austerity of this government over a number of years now, have no fat left to trim. The only thing that we're going to see here now is offices having to reduce the service that they provide Albertans, who are going to have to be looking at reducing staff. Maybe that's exactly what the government members here want to happen. Certainly, I haven't heard any of them provide any kind of rationale for where they think there is space to cut in these budgets.

I will not be supporting this motion.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Chapman.

MLA Shepherd, I saw your hand. Go ahead.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just briefly, to sort of follow up on the comments from my colleague Ms Chapman. The supplementary funding request that was approved by this committee today for this office was \$183,000, so we are effectively cutting by twice that much from the budget ask. Again, MLA Chapman noted that the vast majority of the increasing cost is coming from salary increases we gave with one hand, and now the government members are taking away more than twice as much with the other. That is going to have a deep impact on this office.

I will just note that for each of us as members, for our offices and our staff and our services that we provide to Albertans, none of us has taken a cut. In fact, we get annual increases to cover our staff. We get annual increases to ensure that we can provide our service and our supports. Indeed, there is a select handful of government members who serve as parliamentary secretaries who are going to be getting a top-up to their salary for the work they do on behalf of Albertans. I think the least we can do is respect these offices when they come in, they present the work they have done, the due diligence, the cuts. They have acted in the best of faith to try to provide the services they provide at the best cost they can and to minimize. The government members have refused to meet their requests year over year, which leads to an accumulation, which leads to the point where they are having to make these asks this year.

I will not be supporting the motion. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: All right. I think I'm prepared to call the question.

Oh, MLA Cyr, I see your hand up. Go ahead.

Mr. Cyr: Again, I just want to reiterate that the ask from the Child and Youth Advocate was for an 11 per cent increase in budget from the prior year. We are giving an 8 per cent increase in budget. Terming this as a cut is absurd. I would suggest that when it comes to the good work that they're doing – and I do believe that they are doing excellent work and protecting our youth and children within the province, and I want to see that continue. Over the past two years we've approved practical and reasonable budget increases to this office. This works out to be about 2 per cent, which is in line with inflation. We are actually quadrupling what we've been given in budget increase over the last two years, and to suggest, again, that an 8 per cent increase to the budget from last year is a cut is out of line with reality.

Thank you.

The Chair: MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll just say a couple of things quickly. First of all, recognize that I know from conversations with folks that work in some of these offices that they watch these committee proceedings. I imagine that all of the staff and the officers themselves are tracking what is happening at this committee today. I just want to on behalf of myself and my colleagues offer our apologies for the lack of consideration.

Secondly, I will just simply say this. Actions speak louder than words.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: All right. I think we're ready to call this question. All those in favour of the motion, please say aye. Online? All right. All those opposed to this motion, please say so. And online? All right.

That motion is carried.

Mr. Shepherd: Recorded vote.

The Chair: We have a request for a recorded vote. Those in the room who are in favour of the motion, please raise your hands.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mr. Yao, I see Mr. Rowsell, and I see Mr. Cyr.

The Chair: All right. Those in the room who are opposed to the motion, please raise your hands.

Ms Rempel: Mr. Chair, I see Mr. Dach, I see Mr. Shepherd, and I see Ms Wright.

The Chair: All right. For those members participating remotely, please turn on your cameras and microphones if you wish to vote. When the committee clerk calls your name, please indicate whether you are in favour or against the motion.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mrs. Petrovic.

Mrs. Petrovic: In favour.

Ms Rempel: I see Ms de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: In favour.

Ms Rempel: I see Ms Chapman.

Ms Chapman: Opposed.

Ms Rempel: Mr. Chair, I have five in favour and four against.

The Chair: All right.
That motion is carried.

10:30

We'll move on now to the office of the Ethics Commissioner. The office of the Ethics Commissioner has submitted a budget estimate for the '26-27 year in the amount of \$1,217,500. I'll ask for any discussion. I see MLA de Jonge with her hand. Please go ahead.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Chair. I'll save the discussion for later. I'm actually going to jump right into moving a motion. I move that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices amend the proposed budget estimate for the office of the Ethics Commissioner for the fiscal year 2026-2027 in the amount of \$1,217,500 to the revised amount of \$1,173,100, approve the estimates as amended, and that the Chair, on behalf of the committee, forward the request to the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance.

The Chair: All right. Thank you. Thank you for reading that into the record. MLA de Jonge, would you like to speak to the motion?

Ms de Jonge: I would, yes. Over the past two years this committee has approved reasonable and practical budgetary increases, which works out to be about 2 per cent, in line with inflation, not just an arbitrary number as was suggested earlier. So 2 per cent increases over the last two years. The funding that I'm proposing for today represents an increase of over 7.5 per cent over last year's budget, so a significant increase compared to the last two years. That's 5.5 percentage points.

The intent here is to approve 95 per cent of the funding requested for salaries, wages, and benefits, and the officer's additional requests are being granted. As we've seen throughout our meeting today, we're asking the independent officers to find some savings in their budget to account for that 5 per cent. That's a reasonable ask. That's a prudent ask. I think Albertans expect the government, independent officers, and members of this committee to be thoughtful and prudent with public dollars, and I think this motion reflects that.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA de Jonge.
I see MLA Wright. Go ahead.

Ms Wright: Okay. Chair, I sense that there's a pattern developing where we'll say that this is a real cut – and again, this is a real cut – and the folks across will say, "No, it's not a real cut," except that, of course, it is a real cut. This is taking \$44,000 out of the commissioner's budget for the operations of his office over the next year.

Again, he was exceptionally clear when he was speaking with us last week. He talked about a rise in complaints – a rise in complaints – and he was, again, exceptionally clear about what that means. It means that there is a person in their office who has to go through each and every individual complaint. That is the requirement. That takes time. That also takes a person. There's an increase in lobbying requests. He talked about timelines, that there will be an impact on timelines. If they're getting a rise in complaints or if they're getting a rise simply in inquiries from folks who want to know if they do this, will this be an ethical choice or not, just simply advice, someone has to look at that, and someone has to consider that request, and then someone has to get back to the person who has asked that request. All of that takes time.

Their office is exceptionally small at the moment. They do not have a massive complement of staff. So then, with that commensurate rise in complaints, rise in folks who are simply asking for things, what we're asking them to do is really the impossible, I think.

To take \$44,000 away from them – I would love to know from the folks opposite where they should take \$44,000 because, again, he was exceptionally, exceptionally clear. He talked about the fact that they have absorbed, much like the other offices have, all that they can over the last number of years. They need to update their technology. Should they take it out of that? Should they not go forth and begin that, you know, request for proposal process? Should they not even think about updating that lobbyist registry and just keep it as it is, which we know is not a way forward? Should they take it out of contract services? Where exactly should they take this money from? That would be my question to the members opposite.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Wright.
MLA Chapman, please go ahead.

Ms Chapman: Well, thank you, Chair. Yeah, I would just love to reiterate everything I've said because the case here is exactly the same as it was for every office. If you actually look at the budget, you can see that the vast majority of the increase requested by this office is related to the salary costs due to the government-negotiated and -mandated salary increases to the public service.

To echo my colleague who just spoke, I do wonder if the members – I don't know if they've taken the time to look at the budget documents, to understand them, but if they could come forward and make some real suggestions for where they think the 5 per cent cut can come from these offices. What I see in the budgets is that for all of these offices the vast majority of the budget is to cover the staff costs. That makes sense. All of these offices are people doing work in service of Albertans.

I will not be supporting this motion for the same reason I have not supported the preceding three motions.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.
MLA Petrovic, go ahead, and then we'll go to MLA Dach after.

Mrs. Petrovic: Well, thank you, Chair. I want to reiterate once again that they keep using the word "cuts." It's important to mention that

the budget submitted is an estimate, so the issue of a cut isn't there at all. What we're doing is increasing these budget estimates by 7.5 per cent. I understand that the members opposite, you know, like to continue to use the word "cuts" and are getting extraordinarily repetitive, over and over and over again, about what this looks like.

You know, Chair, I'm just going to say that I'd really like you to call the question. I think at this point it's just become repetitive. There are no cuts that are being presented. It's a 7.5 per cent increase from last year, and it's a budget estimate.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Petrovic. I appreciate your comments for sure. I don't think we need to call the question just yet. We want to make sure everyone gets a chance to weigh in. I would suggest that those watching online can hear both sides, and they'll get a chance to decide what a cut is or isn't.

I have MLA Chapman online, and then I think I had MLA Dach as well. Go ahead, MLA Chapman.

Ms Chapman: Thank you so much, Chair. Just to try to provide clarification again for the member who just spoke, who seems to be not understanding, which is probably why I am repeating the same points over and over. The government approved salary increases for the public service. The offices of the Legislature have come forward with budget requests to cover the mandated salary increases. So if this committee does not approve the budget requests and funding required to cover those salary increases, what are these offices meant to do other than make cuts? They will have to make cuts in order to live within the means that the government members of this committee are setting for them.

They don't control the salary increases mandated by the government. They are obliged to follow those. So when you don't have enough money to pay for the people you have working in your office and the increases that are mandated by the government, what do you do? You cut things. You either cut salary positions or you cut the office's ability to communicate with the public about their work. You cut their ability to advertise their services. You cut the amount of service that you are providing for Albertans. That is absolutely what's happening here. It is absolutely what's happened in the last two years on this committee, and I will keep saying it because I'm not sure that the members opposite are truly hearing it.

Thank you for another chance to speak, Mr. Chair. I appreciate it.

10:40

The Chair: All right. MLA Dach, please. Oh, you're good.

All right. MLA Shepherd, did you . . .

Mr. Shepherd: Oh, I'm good. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. I think we're ready to call this question. In the room all those who support this motion, please say aye. All right. Online? In the room any who oppose this motion, please indicate. And online? All right.

That motion is carried.

Mr. Shepherd: Recorded vote, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We have a request for a recorded vote. A recorded vote has been requested. Those in the room who are in favour of the motion, please raise your hands.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mr. Yao, Mr. Rowswell, and Mr. Cyr.

The Chair: Those who are opposed to the motion, please raise your hands.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mr. Dach, Mr. Shepherd, and Ms Wright.

The Chair: All right. For those members participating remotely, please turn on your cameras and microphones if you wish to vote. When the committee clerk calls your name, please indicate whether you are in favour or against the motion.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mrs. Petrovic.

Mrs. Petrovic: In favour.

Ms Rempel: I see Ms de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: In favour.

Ms Rempel: I see Ms Chapman.

Ms Chapman: Opposed.

Ms Rempel: Mr. Chair, I have five in favour and four against.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much.

That is carried.

We will move on to the office of the Auditor General. The office of the Auditor General submitted a budget estimate for '26-27 in the amount of \$37,960,000. We'll open up for discussion. I see MLA Cyr has his hand up.

Mr. Cyr: Yes. I'd like to move a motion, Mr. Chair, that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices amend the proposed budget estimates for the office of the Auditor General for the fiscal year 2026-2027 in the amount of \$37,960,000 to a revised amount of \$36,477,000, approve the estimates as amended, and that the chair, on behalf of the committee, forward the request to the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Cyr. Thank you for reading that into the record. I would ask: do you have anything to contribute to the motion?

Mr. Cyr: Yes. Again, I would like to just commend the Auditor General on the good work of him and his staff that they're doing within their office. Their ask from last year is a 19.1 per cent increase. It's almost a 20 per cent increase in their budget. We are looking to increase their budget with this amendment by 14 per cent which is, I would say, seven times the rate of inflation.

This is important work that our Auditor General is doing. He's doing investigations. He's doing our audits, as the members opposite have mentioned. We granted the entire supplementary unanimously with the members opposite just to show that we want to ensure that our Auditor General has the ability to be able to meet his duties. At the end of the presentations for the last week the Auditor General said that he has the capability of being able to do his core duties. I'd like to just make sure that that's on the record, that just finding efficiency, along with government, is something you would hope that our Auditor General would strive to do, especially with that office. Finding efficiencies on an almost \$40 million budget is something that I think the Auditor General can strive to do.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: All right. Thank you very much, MLA Cyr.

I'll go to MLA Chapman, and then I'll go to MLA Shepherd.

Ms Chapman: Thank you so much, Chair. Again, just want to remind the committee the reasons for which the Auditor General was requesting an increase to his budget. As the member who spoke before me just mentioned, yes, we did grant the supplementary funding. That's why it's extra confusing for me that we're not granting the budget request, because it is for the same things. The supplementary funding was to cover the mandated increase to public sector salaries. It was also to deal with the audit software that was required and the new audits that are required, the work that was created by this government to create these eight new health organizations. Those were the reasons for the supplementary request. Those are the reasons for the budget request for the following year. Again, if the members could just take a quick moment, the Auditor General – no surprise – produces really lovely, clean financial statements for us to all look at. You can see that the vast majority of the increase that he's looking for falls under the salaries section. We heard the Auditor General speak at length about the things that he has done to decrease the costs in his office. You heard him speak about the complete mismatch on compensation packages between public sector and private sector, their focus on bringing in junior staff to keep costs down. It's clear that the Auditor General – and, to be frank, I'd be shocked if it wasn't this way, you know, to anyone who's ever met or known an accountant – is doing excellent work to do everything he can to minimize costs.

Once again, I would love the members opposite – I don't know if they actually had time to look at the budget documents or if there's, you know, someone who can help explain it to them – to tell me where we think the office of the Auditor General can make a reduction, because those salary increases are mandated. They are mandated by the government.

I will not be supporting this motion.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Chapman.

Maybe this is a good chance for a reminder. I feel there's been respectful conversation. There are some disagreements on some of these issues, which is good; that's why we're all here. I trust that we can all keep our comments respectful and, you know, not necessarily try to impute motives. I appreciate that – not really a point of order right now, but maybe just a quick word of caution to everyone here. I know we have a couple more items that both sides will want to make some commentary on, and if we can continue to keep those comments in a respectful manner, I think it's going to serve our committee well.

Ms Chapman: Thank you for the reminder, Mr. Chair. Really. Thank you.

The Chair: I will move on to MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Obviously, I will not be supporting this motion. You know, Mr. Cyr just now said, essentially, that saving dollars is, quote, something that he thinks the Auditor General would strive to do. Let's be absolutely clear. That is absolutely what the Auditor General has striven to do. He was very, very clear in his remarks. Again I will note that when he was questioned by Mr. Cyr and Mr. Cyr made the suggestion that the Auditor General may be refusing or failing to do his work, I don't know that I've ever seen a public servant at this committee that was so visibly frustrated. Mr. Wylie and the office of the Auditor General do everything possible to reduce their costs to Albertans. To quote from Mr. Wylie at this committee: "the requests that we're bringing forward – and these are not, as I said, nice-to-haves; [these are] reality." To quote further:

Listen, we've been operating: annualized, 1.2 per cent. My goodness, that's less than your cost of living on an annualized basis. We've been doing everything we can to take on all of the additional work. I've been with this office [for] a long time. We have taken on a great amount of work over the years, and our budget . . . is – yeah, it is what it is and it's reality.

To be clear, Mr. Chair, you know, when members opposite talk about: "Well, this is reasonable, practical," reasonable and practical has a great deal more depth than simply setting an arbitrary per cent per year. Yes, you can look at the amount per year and talk about population growth and inflation, but you also have to look at the workload. So let's be absolutely clear on what we have on the Auditor General's desk right now. He is auditing the dissolution of Alberta Health Services and the creation of eight new health entities.

You know, going back to the comments earlier, again, if the concern of the government members is reducing the government deficit and reducing waste, quadrupling the number of ministers, bureaucrats, and health infrastructure: that would probably be a really great place to reduce some of that \$7 billion of debt.

That aside, because the government made that decision, it is Mr. Wylie and his staff's job to ensure that work is done transparently and correctly. To be clear, we are talking about the transfer of hundreds of millions of dollars of assets – infrastructure, equipment, staff – entirely new departments being stood up with new bureaucrats, new managers, new deputy ministers. This is substantial work, hugely important to Albertans to ensure – and the government members have been very clear that they're concerned today about financial propriety. Mr. Wylie is the one who makes sure that happens.

10:50

They have substantially increased his workload, and that's not even going into the things like his investigation into DynaLife, his investigation into what we have termed the corrupt care scandal, work which at various stages this government has made more difficult. He was very clear in his DynaLife report. If the government wants to reduce costs in his office, then maybe provide the documents he needs when he asks for them. Maybe don't redact them. Maybe don't password protect them. Maybe don't obstruct the interviews that he's trying to set up. That would allow his office to work a lot more efficiently and quickly and reduce costs, but no.

This government, on every front, is choosing to increase the workload for his office, and then want to sit and lecture him about finding efficiencies. It's an insult, Mr. Chair, to Mr. Wylie and his office. And the fact is that we are going to be embarking on a search for the next Auditor General of Alberta. What message does that send to the potential candidates who we want to recruit? And what is that going to do to our ability to recruit a quality individual to do that work?

Again, this is some of the most essential work done for Albertans to hold government to account. Again, we don't impute motives of this committee, but certainly Occam's razor says that the simplest explanation is usually the one that's correct. It would certainly seem that if a government does not want to fund the Auditor General, perhaps they don't want to have to see some of the results of that work.

What we have here, and with what the government is proposing to reduce from his budget – just to get back to my numbers here. Again, they approved supplementary funding in the amount of \$1,335,000 and now are reducing this budget ask by \$1,483,000. Once again giving with one hand; taking away with the other. Mr.

Wylie has been very, very clear. He is doing everything he can to save dollars, but this government continues to put more work on his desk. He is bound to do the work that is given to him. Mr. Wylie is not padding his budget. Mr. Wylie is not asking for more than he needs. Indeed, he has shown incredible due diligence year over year, he and his predecessors. So I will not be supporting this motion.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have MLA Yao next on the list.

Mr. Yao: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I need to respond to all the theatrics and the feigned outrage that's coming from His Majesty's Loyal Opposition on this matter. They're certainly taking certain jabs with comments like "not understanding budgets" and "obstructionists." The ask, or the intent to ask all these offices to work with a 95 per cent increase from what their ask was I think is reasonable.

We have to recognize that under Conservative governments over the last 10 years, we've reduced the salaries of MLAs by measures of 5 per cent each. I know math is difficult, so I'll add up for the others. That's a 10 per cent drop there. We wouldn't be in this situation if a previous government from 2015 to 2019 didn't drive our debt up to \$80 billion-plus. That \$80 billion: we're still paying debt repayment on in the billions of dollars. When we're talking about concerning spending, they spent \$3.7 billion on train cars to promote crude by rail, something which private industry could have and should have been doing.

Mr. Shepherd: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Yao: You know who they're subsidizing? They're subsidizing Warren Buffett.

The Chair: This will be a point of order.

Mr. Shepherd: It's under relevance. I recognize that there has been some commentary today around what the current government's decisions are, and that is relevant because the current government is the one that is making these changes. The current government is the one that is saying that they have to reduce their deficit and, therefore, they need to make these changes to these offices. I recognize I have made a number of comments about the decisions of the current government as a part of that. The decisions of a government from six years ago, that have nothing to do with this budget, have no relevance in this discussion.

Now, I recognize that the member may be feeling a bit prickly, but if he wants to defend his government's actions right now on the record and their deficit and their choices, they're the ones that brought it up and put it on the record. I would submit that the record of the NDP government from 2015 to 2019 has nothing to do with the budgets of these officers today.

The Chair: I believe relevance is 23(b), is that correct?

Mr. Yao: Chair, I'd like to respond.

The Chair: Well, yeah, of course. MLA Yao.

Mr. Yao: I do appreciate the member's weak argument, but the members from across the way have continually argued that we do not understand budgets. If the members across the way understood budgets, they would understand that this deficit spending that we're currently doing is as a result of previous governments as well. Again, they drove it up to an \$80 billion debt. We are continuing to still repay that money. I know that's a concept that is very difficult

to grasp, but you have to recognize that is very relevant in our discussions. So I would argue that it is not a point of order. I'm being very relevant. I'm staying true to what we're discussing here, and I would like to continue on with my argument, but I'll leave it up to the chair to rule on that.

The Chair: Sure. Thank you. I don't think this is a point of order at this time. I would like to comment to both sides. This is obviously a wide berth when we're talking about emotion and trying to make these comments relevant about budgets and what may or may not have happened under both governments in the past, so I would caution both sides. If we continue down this path in a meaningful and time-consuming way, we may have to move on, but I do want to give both sides a chance to make their points on this. Again, I would caution that we certainly don't want to go down that path for an extended amount of time or an extended manner.

If you could maybe go ahead, MLA Yao, and hopefully we can get this back in line a little bit.

Mr. Yao: Thank you very much. I'd like to sort of continue just responding to some of the criticisms. The member across the way mentions that the parliamentary secretaries received a nominal increase in their compensation. If the member from across the way understands labour – they pride themselves on respecting unions and stuff like that – if they understand that mentality, they'll understand that folks that do more work get compensated appropriately for that. I don't think the member across the way was a member of a union. You were a bicycle messenger before this? Yeah, so you were unionized?

The Chair: MLA Yao, can we . . .

Mr. Shepherd: Good Lord, Tany.

Mr. Yao: Were you unionized? Were you part of labour?

The Chair: Through the chair.

Mr. Shepherd: Are you asking me to put that on the record? I'm happy to. You want to have a debate on that?

The Chair: Members, I don't think it's serving the committee or any of our committee members to make a lot of comments about individuals on the other side. You'll see in the Chamber that it's often an important part of our debate there, that you tend to make your comments about the government or the opposition, for example. Once we start making individual comments, you often see decorum break down like maybe we have a little bit here. Again, to all members: whether you are commenting on someone moving a motion or arguing a motion or other aspects, it's probably not incredibly helpful when we start talking about individuals in that way, so I would ask all members to refrain from doing that.

Mr. Yao: May I continue, sir?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Yao.

11:00

Mr. Yao: I suppose I'm just saying that the nominal increase for parliamentary secretaries nowhere equals the amount of time and effort that they put into that job, so one could argue even there that it's not the increase that would have been desired.

In this case, all these offices are asking for a certain increase. We're asking them to find a small savings there. I think that's a responsible thing to do considering our financial situation over the province. That's all.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Yao.

I see MLA Shepherd's hand. MLA Wright, you did have your hand first. Do you want to go ahead?

Ms Wright: Sure. Thank you, Mr. Chair. The first thing that I will say, and it's a wee bit related to what the member opposite just talked about: this particular office of the Auditor General did, in fact, over the last number of years already decrease their operating expenses by 5 per cent. The auditor talked about it. He talked about how between 2019 and 2020 is when they began, in fact, those decreases. The first year it was flat; the second year, 3.3 per cent; the next year 2.5 per cent. They have already done this work. They have already done this work.

If I may add as well, he noted that there was a 0 per cent increase on other budget items. As people have talked about, this is indeed about the salaries and benefits that I have already talked about that were indeed timely. The office of the Auditor General talked at length about the fact that I think it was on average they pay something like – oh, I hope my number is correct – 33 per cent less than market rate.

The point is that, particularly for an office like this, we are expecting to go in and it isn't just about the numbers. It's also about processes. It's about procedures. It's about things like procurement. We could go on at length, Mr. Chair, about procurement within this government. We do indeed have these eight new entities, Mr. Chair, in health. The Office of the Auditor General has been asked and tasked with doing appropriate audits on these new entities. I would imagine that will indeed include procurement services.

Again, just getting back to the issue of salary that 33 per cent – sorry. It's not 33 per cent. Their salary is \$33,000 below market, just to clarify that. That speaks to the issue of retention. Over the last number of years, in fact, they have already reduced their FTEs by eight. This office has done the work already.

If they get less than they were asking for, it will indeed have an impact on audits. That's everything from the timelines of audits, and again it's not just about the timelines of different departments in terms of when they might be able to get those audits out but it also speaks to the timelines of the audits of the entire province, our province's consolidated documents that are supposed to come out in the end of June. He talked about that and he talked about the impact that it may have because the only place this office has to cut, and he did say this over and over and over, is in the contract with the agents.

The trouble is that because he had to not sign that original contract with the agents because we didn't give them the supplementary funding in the first place, that contract then gets moved over into 2026. Because it's then a compressed timeline it will in fact cost us more for fewer people and still potentially have the impact of moving everything on down the line.

Again, these are the audited statements of an entire province as well as these eight new entities that are coming on. You know, like, the fact that this office already knows that they have an issue paying folks what the market would bear: we have an issue here, Mr. Chair, and it is, indeed, one of salaries.

I would think that when you're talking about fiscal prudence, and I think my colleague from Edmonton-City Centre talked about this a little bit, it isn't just about that salary; it's about the person, making sure that they're the right fit for that job. In this particular and in fact in all of these offices we want to make sure that all of the folks working on Albertans' behalf are, indeed, the right fit for the job. That absolutely includes salary, but it also includes the conditions of work.

I would say that if I was a person who was thinking, "Maybe I'll make a career change; maybe I should go into the public service; you know, I've had a really lovely career," why on earth would you look

at this? Why on earth would you when you know that, because perhaps you've seen the previous week's episode I'll call it, this office has done everything they possibly could and then some, and here we are asking them to give more. They cannot. It will have an effect on the work that they are able to do. For a government that says, "We want to make sure that this office can do the work it can do," surely the government then must know that will simply be impossible.

I will not be supporting this.

The Chair: All right.

I have MLA Dach. Please go ahead.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just wanted to query the government members a little bit if I could to ask them to explain in more detail how they may have arrived at the 5 per cent number and using population and inflation yardsticks to determine what number to reduce the budgetary estimates by for the Auditor General in this particular case. Since there are a number of very well-educated individuals on the government side, including one accountant, in their line-by-line examination of the budget I'm sure they've looked at it pretty closely.

I'm wondering what mandated work or element of the Auditor General's office's responsibility have committee members decided was superfluous or unnecessary in their examination of the budget to arrive at an amount to deny the Auditor General specifically and what particular audit they wish the Auditor General not to be able to complete before the expiration of his mandate, if, indeed, they could identify that? Which would they hope that the Auditor General would not have the budget for in order to finish it before the expiration of his mandate? If we just explain a few of those details, I think the public would be interested to know how they arrived at the limitations on the Auditor General's budget.

The Chair: MLA Yao, I saw your hand.

Mr. Yao: Again I'll reiterate. No different than Conservative governments have reduced MLA salaries by a total of 10 per cent over the last decade, I don't think it's unreasonable, especially considering the amount of debt and the amount of debt repayment that we're currently doing, to ask offices to demonstrate some fiscal prudence. I mean, again, they're getting an increase of 95 per cent of their ask, which is reasonable. But, again, we need to demonstrate to taxpayers some responsible decision-making here and also recognize that we have to continue to pay down debt and build up the heritage savings trust fund.

I also wish to clarify a comment I made earlier that I think may have been perceived as a dig at the member across the way. I respect that profession. I have some friends who worked in that profession. They provide a very valuable service. I was only trying to point out that he was not part of a labour movement at that time and may not understand the tact of more work for more pay. Actually, maybe you would because in that role the more work you did, the more you got paid. Definitely demonstrates some capitalist endeavors there, so I appreciate that, but in no way was that a job against anyone's career. Everyone provides a viable role in our world.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, MLA Yao.

I think that might be it. Did anyone else have ...

Mr. Shepherd: Myself, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Oh, okay. Got lost in the shuffle. MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I appreciate that clarification from Mr. Yao.

My own frustration with the comment was more that it just seemed incredibly cliché, the mere fact that I happened to be

someone that travelled quite a bit by bike, that I would have worked as a bike messenger. I'm well familiar with Mr. Yao's own employment career as a firefighter and paramedic and certainly have respect for him in that and certainly wouldn't make assumptions in a similar way. I can say that, indeed, I have worked in union positions during my time as a labourer with the city of Edmonton, during my time as a writer with Alberta health, during my career with the Canada Revenue Agency, where I worked as a taxpayer services agent and a leader on their learning team and training facilitator. Certainly I'm well familiar with the concept of if someone does more work, they should get more pay.

What I would say is that's exactly what we're talking about here today. As I noted in my comments earlier, this government has given considerably more work to the Auditor General. They have created it. They have generated it by their decisions, again, by choosing to dissolve Alberta Health Services and quadruple the bureaucracy involved with four new ministers and eight new health entities. Therefore they have increased the work. The Auditor General is asking for more pay to do that work. He does not have a choice in that. That is work that is mandated to him to do on behalf of the people of Alberta. To be absolutely clear – I know the member understands. I just want to clarify the language. He is not asking for a 95 per cent increase in his budget. What the government is offering is 95 per cent of what he has asked for in terms of the increase in his budget, just to be clear on that.

11:10

In terms of that 5 per cent let's go back to what was actually said on the record. So Ms Eng from the Auditor General's office:

I want to add another comment on the 5 per cent cut on operating costs. We are aware that the government departments are doing this for this upcoming budget year, but I'd like to let the committee to know that our office did that five years ago. For our budget in 2019-20 we did a voluntary budget cut of 3.3 per cent. In the next year we did another voluntary budget cut of 2.5 per cent. So that's in the first three years that Doug became the AG of our office.

In [our] first year . . . we presented a voluntary flat budget; second year, 3.3 per cent cut; and third year, 2.5 per cent cut. We did that ahead of the game voluntarily, so right now we are running a bare-bones budget. There is really no discretionary operational area that we can really cut. Further cuts will cause us to sacrifice the audit resource competencies and eventually impact the work of timely delivery and quality of the work.

The office is quite clear. They made that 5 per cent cut voluntarily long before the government decided to move forward on that in its departments.

I'll reiterate that none of us as MLAs are taking a 5 per cent cut in our office budget. None of us. Yeah, we do more work as MLAs. I'll tell you being a shadow minister that there's a lot of extra work on my plate on top of being an MLA. I do not get extra pay for that work. The work I did as critic for health through the midst of a pandemic and the war on doctors: that was a considerable increase on my work and my staff. I did not receive extra pay for that work, and I'm not saying that I should have. What I am saying is that I recognize the significant work that is being done by the office of the Auditor General.

The fact that they have done their due diligence repeatedly, voluntarily, they took leadership: that is leadership, Mr. Chair. Sitting here at this table and dictating to others what they need to do is not leadership. Leadership is understanding the realities of the circumstances, the complexities, the nuances, and having flexibility based on what is reality, not performative posturing.

I will not be supporting this motion.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Shepherd.

We've certainly heard a fulsome debate on this issue. MLA Wright, I did see your hand. I hope it's something new or substantial or important, but I certainly want to give you the chance. Go ahead.

Ms Wright: Mr. Chair, I was a teacher. There's always something new and substantial for me.

Okay. I want us to come back, Chair, to the words of Mr. Wiley himself, if I may. One of the things that he said to us very clearly, and I will quote as directly as I possibly can: he says,

I guess what we would have to do is, if we didn't get the funding, as I said, we would have to go back and see where we could shave that off how we pay our contractors and have to then work with those that we audit because that would impact the year-end's work and the timelines of those organizations being able to release their audited financial statements. We'd have to move when we do our audit work to the nonbusy season . . .

That's because, Chair, they would have to do the work themselves rather than have the ability to hire contractors. He talked, again, at great length about that.

. . . which would require us to be issuing the audited financial statements at a different time, which is going to cause, I would assume, some disruption for those that we audit.

That's the reality of what we're faced with. I said that seriously. Listen, we've been operating: annualized, 1.2 per cent. Nowhere near inflation, I might add over the last number of years, Chair.

My goodness, that's less than your cost of living on an annualized basis. We've been doing everything we can to take on all of the additional work.

I will add here that one of the things that he said is that they do, on average, something like a hundred audits. That's what they're working on. That is not what we see in other jurisdictions, including Ontario. That's important to my colleague's point about more work.

"I've been with this office a long time. We have taken on a great amount of work over the years, and our budget . . . is – yeah, it is what it is and it's reality." This is a realistic budget, Chair: in supplies and services, information systems technology, a whole whopping 3.4 per cent increase; professional development, 1.6; facilities and equipment, they're estimating a decrease of 5.2 per cent; travel, a decrease of 6.7 per cent. This is an office that indeed is doing more, I would say, than one might expect of them. They have done it pre-emptively. Again, I will not be supporting this motion.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

I think we're ready to call the question. All those in the room who are in favour of the motion, please say aye. All those online? All right. Any in the room who are opposed to the motion? Online? Okay.

The motion is carried.

Mr. Shepherd: Recorded vote, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: All right. We have a request for a recorded vote. Those in the room who are in favour of the motion, please raise your hand.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mr. Cyr, I see Mr. Rowswell, and I see Mr. Yao.

The Chair: All right. Those in the room who are opposed to the motion, please raise your hand.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mr. Dach, I see Mr. Shepherd, and I see Ms Wright.

The Chair: All right. For those members participating remotely, please turn on your cameras and microphones if you wish to vote. When the committee clerk calls your name, please indicate whether you are in favour or against the motion.

Ms Rempel: Mrs. Petrovic.

Mrs. Petrovic: In favour.

Ms Rempel: Ms de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: In favour.

Ms Rempel: Ms Chapman.

Ms Chapman: Opposed.

Ms Rempel: Mr. Chair, I have five in favour and four against.

The Chair: All right.

That motion is carried.

We have one office left, which is Elections Alberta. I suspect both sides will have important points to raise, and I would ask that we make those points respectfully. I trust that our committee will be able to do so. Elections Alberta submitted a budget estimate for '26-27 in the amount of \$64,112,000.

We'll now go to discussion on the matter. MLA Cyr, I see your hand. Go ahead.

Ms Chapman: Mr. Chair, before we begin the discussion . . .

The Chair: Yeah. Sorry. Go ahead, MLA Chapman.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just out of an abundance of caution due to a clear conflict of interest I'm going to recuse myself for this portion of the meeting. I will exit and rejoin the meeting when you've completed this discussion.

The Chair: All right. Thank you for that, MLA Chapman.

Ms Chapman: Thank you.

The Chair: Yeah.

Go ahead, MLA Cyr.

Mr. Cyr: Yes. I'd like to move a motion that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices amend the proposed budget estimates for the office of the Chief Electoral Officer for the fiscal year '26-27 in the amount of \$64,112,000 to a revised amount of \$51,179,500, approve the estimates as amended, and the chair on behalf of the committee forward the request to the President of Treasury Board and the Minister of Finance.

The Chair: Okay. It looks like we have that motion on our screens. Thank you for reading that motion into the record. MLA Cyr, would you like to speak to the motion?

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Again, the good work that our Elections Alberta office is doing: I recognize that they're breaking some ground when it comes to recall and the citizens' initiative. The request from the Elections Alberta office is about a 301 per cent increase. It sounds staggering when you first hear that amount, but recognizing that they have to ramp up to prepare for the upcoming election – that's usually done a couple of years in advance – it's anticipated that they are going to need a larger amount when it comes to preparing for an election that is going to be held two years from now. Now, the proposed funding that we had done for the

amendment is actually increasing the office to 220 per cent, not the 301 per cent that the office had asked for. This gives the office about a 13 per cent increase over the '22-23 election.

11:20

This is an increase. I recognize that, again, the opposition members have continued to use the word "cut," but that defies common sense. We see an increase in budget from the prior year of a large amount, recognizing the fact that the Elections Alberta commissioner needs more money to be able to prepare for it. We unanimously agreed with the supplementary supply, giving him more money to be able to deal with the recalls that are currently before us, and he said that with that money that we have given him, with the supplementary, it would wholly cover the citizens' initiative that is being moved forward and the current recalls that are before the province.

I would ask that the members consider that, in the end, what we're looking to do is ensure that the Election Commissioner has the funds to be able to carry out a successful election. The prior amount was sufficient for the last election; 13 per cent over that amount is something that I think is quite reasonable. I would hope that all members of this committee would support a 220 per cent increase in the budget for this next year.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Cyr.

I have MLA Shepherd up first.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just to speak to that number, when Mr. Cyr talks about this 300 per cent, 220 per cent, let's be clear what the context is for Elections Alberta. Elections Alberta has a cyclical budget cycle. Their budget is quite a bit lower for a number of years postelection because they do not have to conduct an election. An election is an enormous expense, so it is normal to have an increase in hundreds of per cent every few years in the budget, and then the budget will come back down. I recognize these numbers sound big and dramatic, but this is part of the normal cycle of the process. Elections are a big expense. They ask for that money, and the budget comes down when the election is done.

Now, let's talk about the reasonableness, then, of the expense that is being requested. Mr. Cyr talked about 13 per cent higher this time than the last election. Well, we've been through quite a bit of inflation, Mr. Chair, quite a bit of competition for staff. Renting spaces is more expensive. Utilities costs are more expensive. Materials are universally more expensive. Every aspect of conducting an election is more expensive, and that's not even including all of the legislative changes.

Let's be clear, Mr. Chair. Every single session we've had since the 2023 election this government has made amendments to the Election Act. Every single time. That creates more work for Elections Alberta, and as Mr. Yao noted, when people have more work, they should get more pay, because it takes more to do it.

Elections Alberta, for example, is going to have to communicate to Albertans that the government has made changes that now require them to bring their voter ID. They're going to have to communicate to Albertans that the government's legislative changes to elections means there will be fewer opportunities for them to vote in advance. They're going to have to communicate a lot to Albertans about how this government has changed the electoral landscape and how they will be voting and their opportunities to vote. That is in part what Mr. McClure is preparing for here with this budget.

This government has consistently and repeatedly said that there is going to be a referendum, and indeed we just saw legislation in

the Legislature clearing the path to ensure that referendum happens. Mr. McClure as a public servant is doing what public servants do. Again, as I mentioned, I worked in the Alberta public service. I know many people that work in the Alberta public service. When government, even during an election – when people make electoral proposals and they say, “This is what we will do if we form government,” there are people in the public service doing the work, the due diligence, to prepare for the possibility that if that party gets elected, they’re able to start to do the work and hit the ground running. Similarly, when the Premier stands up and repeatedly says that she intends to hold an election in 2026, when the government moves legislation saying that they are going to hold a referendum in 2026, the folks at Elections Alberta do what they are supposed to do. They prepare for the reality of a referendum in 2026, and what Mr. McClure and his team were very clear about is that the costs of operating a referendum are pretty much the same as running an election.

To say, you know, that it’s perfectly reasonable that we ask him to reduce his ask by 5 per cent: the assumption there, Mr. Chair, is that Mr. McClure and his team are padding their budget, that there is fat to cut, that there must be, absolutely has to be there; there’s no question of the fact. But as we heard from repeated legislative officers last week and as we’ve put on the record today, pretty much every single one of those officers came in here and said: “We have endured cuts over the last few years already. We are down to the bone.”

Now, again, I recognize that in this case there is a certain amount of speculation involved. That is the tricky bit with Elections Alberta. But what government members are maintaining if they say, “Well, absolutely, you know, this amount that we are willing to give is enough”: they are questioning the ability of the folks in Elections Alberta to do these estimates. These are the folks who know this best. And, hey, again, I recognize that when they came in and they talked about the recall petitions and that, they made the best estimate they could. It ended up being lower, so they came back and they corrected that. And, again, every dollar that is not used by Elections Alberta comes back. These are not dollars that are being wasted. These are not dollars that are being misspent. These are dollars that are going to the most essential part of our democracy.

Frankly, Mr. Chair, I want to ensure that in the chaos of this legislative landscape, where we have the government shifting the goalposts and changing the rules every six months, Elections Alberta is in the best position they can be to navigate that landscape and ensure that if we have that referendum, when we have that next election, it’s conducted with full integrity. Government members have been very clear. They passed legislation to say that it’s absolutely essential that Albertans be able to have trust in our electoral process. Now, I disagree with the measures they brought in that they said would do that, but I absolutely agree with that principle. Again, Mr. McClure and his staff are only doing what they are mandated to do under the changes imposed by this government and giving their best faith budget in terms of what they believe that is going to cost.

To take this situation now, where we’ve given them the supplementary funding today that they requested but then are going to claw back on this from the budget request another \$12 million, again, that essentially obliterates the supplementary funding request that was put in. That actually will put Mr. McClure and his team potentially at about a \$3 million deficit from what they were planning and what they’ve budgeted and what they’ve estimated.

Frankly, Mr. Chair, I trust the CEO and his team in estimating this far more than anyone else at this table, and in that I include myself. Yes, we are here to oversee and do due diligence – that is part of our job as elected leaders in this province – but, again, none

of these dollars gets wasted. Anything not spent comes back, so I cannot support this motion.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Shepherd.

I have a bit of a list: MLA Petrovic, MLA Yao, and then MLA Wright. We’ll start with MLA Petrovic.

11:30

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair. Appreciate it. You know, contrary to popular opinion from those opposite I know how to read a budget. I actually looked at the budget requests over the past four years and eight years ago just to see how this year’s request at the same point in the election cycle compares to this year. Each year at the same point in the election cycle, 2019 and 2023, there was a significant ask for money, and each year significant amounts were returned. For example, in 2019 there was \$23 million of unused funds; in 2023, \$26 million in unused funds. Today’s decision, or, hopefully, decision, because I am in support of this motion, is going to keep flexibility in place to allow additional funding requests if needed.

So as we look at this budget, as we look at years past and what this looks like, I’m in full favour of this – I believe it was Mr. Cyr who made this motion – to revise these amounts, especially when looking at the budgets from previous years and in the same sort of previous election cycle as well. I just want to note that it is a 220 per cent increase over last year’s budget as well.

I just wanted to make that point. That’s it for right now, Chair. I’m curious to see how the members opposite are going to, I guess, justify that.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Petrovic.

Mr. Yao: We should alternate.

The Chair: Mr. Yao is wanting me to alternate. I agree, so we’ll go to MLA Wright, and then we’ll go to MLA Yao.

Ms Wright: Thank you, Chair. Okay. I will attempt to do some of the justification that my colleague just asked for. The first thing is that I would say that there are some differences from 2019 and 2023. The biggest difference that I can see is having to do with the electoral landscape and how it has changed here. Should all of the recalls go forth – and it’s a “should.” This is kind of the world that Elections Alberta lives in: it should, what if. They need to prepare for all of those eventualities and then more. They certainly have some in the supplementary funding which was just granted. They certainly have some room to do some of that preparatory work, but there isn’t room to run an entire event, and they very much talked about the potential for a referendum to be an event much like an election is an event.

There is a potential now, I think, because of Bill 14 passing, depending upon what the government decides to do, that we could potentially be looking at not just one but two referenda in the coming year. Again, it depends upon what the government decides to do with things and, of course, depends upon if the second referendum initiative meets the threshold. I understand all of that, Chair.

However, again, we’re living in the world of possibilities and eventualities and needing to prepare in the very best way possible. So if we’re looking at just that, there’s the potential – actually, I should add that there’s the potential for three events because we could be looking at two separate referenda, two separate questions, potentially a third one, actually, because I’ve forgotten the last one that came in from Mr. Lund, so there’s even an additional one that could come up. There’s also potential for an election event. This is

an extraordinary amount of work, perhaps the potential for four massive, province-wide events sometime in the next year or two, for which this office needs to prepare.

And they need to prepare not just on a small scale; it's a massive scale. Mr. McClure and the folks who worked with him talked about a number of things that come to bear. They talked about the simple space. Right now they don't have space. They need space, unlike in other provinces that have run other recalls and that sort of thing. They had the space available to them; we do not. So they certainly need to add the space.

Technology: they need to buy all of the computers. You know, you think about when you go to vote. It isn't just a computer for one returning officer; it's a computer for every single poll clerk because they need to have that computer, and then you need to make sure that they've got the right kind of software. That's just for one election event, and then perhaps because it's a different election – I don't know – or a different event, you might have to have something slightly different in terms of what it is you're offering folks.

The training will have to be different. You think about the difference in verifying each and every signature that comes in for a citizens' initiative versus verifying, as my colleague talked about, that person's ID who's just coming in to vote. We all know that it took a wee bit longer to vote in the cities in the last municipal election. I would say it's probably going to take a little bit longer to vote in whether it's a referendum event or a general election.

They also talked about the fact that because we've lost the ability to use tabulators, that means they need to have about 20,000 people to do those vote counts. Again, they need to hire all those people, and that takes time, which I think is probably the reason for the uptick in travel. They, in fact, need to travel around the province to hire these people to make sure that they have the right people hired and then further to train all the folks. Again, it can't just happen. You know, like – I think this will age me – in *Bewitched* when Samantha would move her nose and all the lovely things would appear: we can't operate that way. They have to plan ahead.

Of course, there's a massive, massive difference in freight and postage and rentals, and that's because we now need to mail everything, and you need to have the timelines. Mail has increased. The cost of postage has increased, to say nothing of the materials in terms of what it is you're actually needing to post, getting it to an elector and then getting it back and then having someone not only send it out but also have someone receive it and then to count it afterwards, Mr. Chair. Again, a massive increase in contract services. Well, of course, there is because they have to prepare for all of these events.

One of the folks who was talking said:

Basically [if] there's a snap election called . . .

And, to my mind, that would also work for a snap referendum, if I might call it that.

. . . there are some things that must be in place. We can't start when the snap election is called. We must always be in a state of readiness, at every point in time. So that is the challenge we face as an office. Besides the election workers or returning officers, we also have critical materials and supplies that must always be available.

Like, you think about the difference between a potential by-election because of a successful recall event. You think about just simple ballot paper. They talked about the fact that the ballot paper isn't actually readily available, and they need to include all of these things.

We must keep a certain level of stock in the warehouse and continue to monitor those. Those are very critical. We do not get to start the procurement process when an election is called. We

have to put some things in place. That is the challenge we have, especially when it has to do with when it has a provincial dimension to it.

As I just said, there is indeed a potential for four massive provincial events in the next year or two. They have to have all of these supplies at the ready because they simply do. They also very much talked about the fact that in terms of computers and technology, you know, they're looking at sort of us becoming the new Ontario, if you will, where perhaps we can rent out some of those computers and other equipment to other jurisdictions to help recoup some of that cost. But the reality is that they have to have all of those things at the ready.

In addition to that, we can't forget that Elections Alberta also runs investigations that have to continue to run, you know, when people do things as simple as miss a filing deadline. All of those things have to be investigated, so those things have to continue as well. I would worry that if we're not giving them this funding that they are asking for, that might have an impact on things like investigations. They've already talked about having to become more reactive rather than proactive. It's just, like, you know – yeah. Yeah.

I won't be supporting this motion, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Wright.

MLA Yao, go ahead.

Mr. Yao: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just want to note for the record that the initial projections from the Chief Electoral Officer for these recall elections, should they happen, were initially at the amount of about a million dollars per recall. The newer number of approximately \$300,000 is definitely a lot more reasonable, but it certainly demonstrates to me the humanity and the people that create these budgets. They're not perfect. None of us are. For us to provide them with 95 per cent of their ask is not unreasonable, again, also recognizing that not every recall campaign will be successful. I hope that they will return the unspent money that is being allocated for those things.

Again, I need to emphasize that we would not be in this situation if we were not still repaying a loan of \$3.7 billion to subsidize Warren Buffett's investments in rail.

11:40

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Yao.

I have MLA Dach next.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I just wanted to reflect upon the role of this committee. My clear understanding of our work is that we are an oversight committee, and we oversee the legislative officers in a way that, I believe, foundationally, should be to facilitate their work, to foster their work, not to frustrate their work. Certainly, we are mindful of budgets, but what Member Petrovic recently stated in her comments was, quote, that we need to have or we have the flexibility to allow additional funding requests, unquote, for legislative offices going forward. That, in my mind, is one of the problems we've been facing as a committee in our deliberations today, that the government seems to think they should deficit fund these committees so that in future years they will have the flexibility, quote, unquote, to come forward and ask this committee for supplementary budgets, which is indeed not the way that we should be looking to facilitate, in my mind, the legislative officers.

What this flexibility does, Mr. Chair, is keep the legislative officers off balance. In this case we're talking about Elections Alberta and the Chief Electoral Officer. It keeps them off balance, so they don't know from year to year if indeed they're going to have the finances to hire the people they need, if they're going to be able

to perform the work that they anticipate might happen. I think it's an improper way of conducting ourselves as a committee, to have as a goal keeping the legislative officers off balance financially so that they don't know how to plan properly to perform their duties.

That being said, I think that we should keep in mind that the annual expectation that legislative officers should have the flexibility, quote, unquote, to come forward for additional funding requests, supplementary money, is the wrong direction to go in. Certainly, guard the gates as far as the financing is concerned and make sure we don't see exceptional funding requests become the norm, but I don't think that's been the pattern, Mr. Chair.

However, the arbitrary reduction of requested amounts that we've seen in the budget estimates is also not the way that this committee should adopt to fund the committees because what happens, Mr. Chair, is what we're seeing right now, where the legislative officer, in this case the Chief Electoral Officer, is off balance and has an unprecedented amount of work at his feet, some of which may or may not be actually necessary, but the government members seem to be taking the stance that they already know which one, for example, of the recall petitions the government thinks will proceed or not.

I'm wondering what the calculation was on the part of government members indeed when they were estimating or analyzing which recall petition may or may not be successful in order to determine how much they would be reducing the Chief Electoral Officer's budget by. Is it because they think perhaps none of them should proceed, that they think the process is wholly illegitimate and the recall petition should not proceed in all their own way or not, or indeed if they think that there are petitions that will particularly fail; therefore, they have decided on an arbitrary amount based on that calculation? Just a little additional explanation might be warranted here.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Dach.

On my list I have MLA Shepherd next. Go ahead.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just to follow a little bit on what MLA Dach was just speaking about, the question of uncertainty. Certainly, that has been the case, I think, year over year with this committee under this current Legislature, where officers have not known in advance what the expectations of government or the committee are going to be. What we have seen consistently is that the officers come in and they present their budget and their business plan and there are some questions. I have yet to hear any government member, you know, speak to them and say: okay; if you were to receive 5 per cent less than you asked, what would the impact be? How would that affect your budget? Are there places you feel where this 5 per cent could be taken? That is the opportunity we have for that dialogue, to understand.

I mean, if that's truly what we're trying to do, work together with the officers to engage, to achieve good ends for Albertans, that would seem to be the opportunity to do it. But what we see instead is that the officers come, they present their things, they leave. Then we come back, and members dictate that they're going to make that cut. It's certainly possible for government to reach out to officers of the Legislature ahead of time and say: hey, our expectation this year is going to be a 2 per cent, 3 per cent, 4 per cent, 5 per cent cut. Then the officers could come to this committee prepared to address that question, and they could present a budget that has that. They could present maybe a budget that has that and a budget that does not, and we'd be able to have a rational dialogue about what the impacts of that might be. That has yet to happen.

So, indeed, I agree with Mr. Dach that that introduces a great deal of stress and uncertainty for these officers as they attempt to do their

work. I'll tell you that what I saw from the folks when they came here and presented, and certainly from, you know, the Auditor General, the Chief Electoral Officer, is just exasperation. They're so desperately trying to understand what it is that government wants them to do and how they want them to do it. There is this lack of communication which impacts their ability to do that.

The last thing I just want to touch on, just in response to Mr. Yao. I'd say that there is a significant difference between estimates for new and unknown processes like recall and citizen initiatives and known processes like a provincial election. The vast majority of the increase in costs we're talking about here is for the realities of that provincial election and for a referendum, which again is a known quantity, having conducted one under the Kenney government on equalization. These are things that Elections Alberta has done and is very familiar with and knows how to go about, I think, providing reasonable estimates for those.

Again, I will not be supporting this motion.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

MLA Wright, go ahead.

Ms Wright: Yeah. Just to add a couple of things to the discussion, Chair. The first is that there are, of course, as my colleague just alluded to, some additional complexities as well. Depending upon when a general election might be held, for example, we could indeed be working under new boundaries, which will also mean that there will be some additional expenses incurred by this office, which I think cannot be discounted or, in fact, forgotten about. Bill 54 as well has made a difference in terms of the planning and preparatory nature of the work of this office.

Again I do feel it necessary to state that with this \$13 million cut – and I will call it a cut because that is exactly what it is, Chair; it is a cut – we cannot forget that Mr. McClure was very, very definitive in his statement that if they did not receive the full budgetary amount that they were asking for in the '26-27 budget estimates, they would likely need to enter into that process of encumbrance, of being encumbered, which means, in fact, that they will be running at a deficit. They have to do this work. If there is a recall, they have to do all the things that they have to do legislatively to account for the recall, to make sure that folks in that particular constituency have the opportunities that they should have. We are indeed living in a democracy at the moment.

If there is a citizen initiative referendum, this office needs to make sure that there are ballots for people to fill out, that there are people working as poll clerks and as returning officers and as deputy returning officers. If there is an election, they have to do exactly that same thing. They still have to do this work, Mr. Chair. The idea of having a legislative office be encumbered in subsequent years: I don't understand why we would be okay with that. This is a budget that is not only realistic but, again, is a thinking forward budget, a what-if budget.

To answer Mr. Yao. He used the word "hope," where he said: I would hope the money would be returned. The money would be returned. That is the process.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Wright.

Thank you, members, for that important discussion.

I think we're prepared to call this question. For those in the room here, all those in favour of the motion, please say aye. Online? All right. In the room, those who are opposed to the motion? I don't see anyone else online who hasn't voted.

That motion is carried.

Mr. Dach: A recorded vote.

11:50

The Chair: We have a request for a recorded vote. Those in the room who are in favour of the motion, please raise your hand.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mr. Yao, Mr. Rowswell, and Mr. Cyr.

The Chair: All those in the room who are opposed to the motion, please raise your hand.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see Mr. Dach, Mr. Shepherd, and Ms Wright.

The Chair: All right. For those members participating remotely, please turn on your cameras and microphones if you wish to vote. When the committee clerk calls your name, please indicate whether you are in favour or against the motion.

Ms Rempel: Mrs. Petrovic.

Mrs. Petrovic: In favour.

Ms Rempel: Ms de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: In favour.

Ms Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have five in favour and three against.

The Chair: All right.

That motion is carried.

We are going to take a quick five-minute break so we can set up the room for our next agenda item. We'll set a timer for five minutes.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 11:51 a.m. to 11:57 a.m.]

The Chair: All right, everyone. Welcome back.

We're going to move on to the next agenda item, which is the Auditor General search. I'll begin by reading the mandate. This was Government Motion 13. The Standing Committee on Legislative Offices has an existing mandate provided through legislation, the standing orders, and established practices. However, it also operates according to instructions from the Assembly. Through Government Motion 13, which was agreed to on November 25, this committee was assigned a special task. We have been charged with inviting applications for the position of Auditor General and recommending to the Assembly the applicant we consider most suitable for that position. I'd ask at this time if there are any questions regarding the committee's mandate.

I just want to confirm with the clerk that we don't need a motion for this. This is just for discussion, correct?

Ms Rempel: Correct.

The Chair: Okay. Are there any members wishing to make a comment? MLA Cyr.

Mr. Cyr: Yes. I'd like to move a motion that
the Standing Committee on Legislative . . .

The Chair: MLA Cyr, I don't think this is – there's no motion on this part of the agenda.

Mr. Cyr: Well, I really want to move this motion.

The Chair: You're all fired up, yeah.

Mr. Cyr: My apologies for jumping the gun, sir.

The Chair: Yeah, all good, but if I don't see any answer, we don't go anywhere. We'll switch over to part (b), which is the draft advertising strategy. Just to let everyone know, a draft communications plan and an advertising copy have been distributed for consideration. Before we get to any motions, I will ask Ms Sorensen to address this document, and then I'll open the floor to discussion.

Ms Sorensen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good morning, committee. Yeah, it is still morning. Okay. I just want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to present this plan. I know you had an original plan sent to you that had a few numbers that we were still confirming. We are still confirming some of those numbers, but our primary goal with this is to ensure broad awareness of the opportunity among qualified candidates to drive traffic to the Assembly website and to maintain transparency and credibility throughout the process.

We are recommending a multichannel approach that would include advertising on our website, social media, media relations, as well as the Auditor General's website. We'd also be targeting professional networks both at the national and provincial levels, and to maximize visibility, we would also recommend working with Postmedia and the *Globe and Mail* to do some recruitment advertising.

These are very similar to what we've done with other legislative office committees as well as other campaigns that we've run. While the numbers are still being confirmed, I'm confident in saying that the entire budget that we are looking at is under \$25,000. We are currently looking for some direction from the committee, or any discussion. I would be happy to answer any questions based on the plan that you were given last week.

The Chair: All right. Thank you very much for that information. I'd be derelict in duty not to go to MLA Cyr first, considering how eager he was. Go ahead, MLA Cyr.

Mr. Cyr: I'm very eager on this one. Love advertising. Well done. I move that

the Standing Committee of Legislative Offices approve the proposed advertising strategy for the recruitment of the Auditor General.

The Chair: We'll get that up on the screen, but happy to hear – actually, MLA Cyr, did you have any comments in speaking to this motion?

Mr. Cyr: Yeah. Well, it's the understanding that the bulk of these responsibilities related to the Auditor General search committee will be delegated to the subcommittee. The advertising strategy involves spending and funds that must be approved by the full committee, which I fully respect. The advertising strategy that is put forward by Communications – thank you for that clarity – is reasonable. It's cost conscientious, and it follows the prior search committee's advertising strategies, that have proven to be successful in highly qualified candidates of the past. I encourage all members to vote for this motion.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Cyr. Are there any other members looking to join the discussion? All right.

Seeing none, I'm prepared to call the question. All those in favour of the motion, please say aye. Online? All right. Any opposed? All right. Hearing none.

That motion is carried.

We'll now move on to a discussion on the subcommittee. Some committee members have raised the possibility of striking a

subcommittee to conduct many of the search and recruitment responsibilities and report back to the larger committee. I would now open the floor to discussion on potentially establishing a subcommittee. MLA Rowswell, go ahead.

Mr. Rowswell: I'd like to make a motion.

The Chair: Please do.

Mr. Rowswell: That would be great. I would like to move in accordance with standing order 52.001 that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices establish a subcommittee to be referred to as the Auditor General Search Committee as follows:

- (a) The mandate of the subcommittee shall be
 - (i) to invite applications for the position of Auditor General in accordance with Government Motion 13, agreed to by the Assembly on November 25, 2025, and
 - (ii) to recommend to the committee that applicants it considers most suitable for that position.
- (b) The subcommittee shall be comprised of
 - (i) the chair of the committee as the chair of the subcommittee and
 - (ii) three members nominated by the government caucus and
 - (iii) two members nominated by the Official Opposition caucus.
- (c) The members referred to in clauses (b)(ii) and (iii) must be nominated on or before December 15, 2025, and
- (d) The quorum for the meeting of the subcommittee is three members: at least one member from each caucus referred to in clauses (b)(ii) and (iii) in attendance. A member of the committee may substitute for a member of the subcommittee at a meeting, provided that notice of substitution is provided to the committee clerk before the subcommittee meeting commences.

The Chair: Is there any discussion on this motion? The amendment would be in order during this discussion, right? Okay, go ahead MLA Cyr.

Mr. Cyr: I just noticed that when you were proposing the motion that you went 52.001, when it's in fact 52.011. Is there clarity there?

The Chair: I think we would defer to what's on the screen.

Mr. Cyr: I was just asking.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA Cyr.

MLA Yao, you would like to move an amendment, sounds like?

Mr. Yao: Yes. I would like to move that

the motion be amended by

- (a) striking out clause (b)(ii) and substituting:

“(b)(ii) members Nolan Dyck and Jackie Lovely, nominated by the government caucus, and”
- (b) striking out clause (b)(iii) and substituting:

“(b)(iii) members David Shepherd and Peggy Wright, nominated by the Official Opposition caucus,”
- (c) striking out clause (c),
- (d) renumbering clause (d) as clause (c), and
- (e) renumbering clause (e) as clause (d).

Thank you.

12:05

The Chair: All right. Thank you, MLA Yao, for reading that into the record.

I think that is now on our screen. I will open the floor for discussion on this amendment. MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Yeah. I'm in support of the principle. I think a subcommittee is reasonable to make it a bit easier for us to have that flexibility. I've worked in both circumstances on this committee. When I was chair of the committee, we did a number of search processes which involved all members of the committee, but also, you know, when we were looking for a new auditor for the Auditor General, we did that via subcommittee and did find that was efficient. I'm certainly amenable to it here.

I do have one question. We have the original motion, which mentions the chair of the committee, three members nominated by the government caucus, and two members nominated by the Official Opposition. The amendment proposes two government members and two members of the Official Opposition. I just want to clarify that, in fact, that amendment then is changing that principle so that there is not going to be an additional government member; there will just simply be the two, Nolan and Jackie, that have been named and then myself and Peggy.

The Chair: Yes. MLA Shepherd, I believe that your clarification is correct.

Mr. Shepherd: Excellent. Thank you, Mr. Chair. That being the case, then, I'm in support of the motion.

Though I was in favour of extending the contract of Mr. Wiley, that having been decided, I'm happy to participate in the process to select our next Auditor General.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dach: Just for further clarification, I believe it was mentioned in the conversation I heard just now that two members from each, government and opposition caucus, would be named and the chair. So the chair will hold a deciding vote.

The Chair: Yeah. Two members from each caucus, and I will be the chair of the subcommittee.

Is there anyone else who would like to speak? All right.

Seeing none, we can call this question. On the amendment, all those in favour, please say aye. Online? All right. Are there any opposed? Hearing none.

That motion is carried.

Now we vote on the motion as amended. All those in favour, please say aye. Online? Are there any opposed? All right. Hearing none.

That motion as amended is carried

All right. We can move on in our agenda to other business. Are there any items for discussion under other business?

Seeing none, our next meeting date will be held at the call of the chair, and we can move to adjournment. Would a member like to move a motion to adjourn?

Mr. Yao: Right here.

The Chair: MLA Yao has moved. All those in favour, please say aye. Online? Any opposed? Seeing none, that motion is carried.

[The committee adjourned at 12:09 p.m.]

