



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Special Standing Committee
on
Members' Services

Tuesday, November 26, 2024
9 a.m.

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Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

Cooper, Hon. Nathan M., Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills (UC), Chair
Getson, Shane C., Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland (UC), Deputy Chair

Eggen, David, Edmonton-North West (NDP)
Gray, Christina, Edmonton-Mill Woods (NDP)
Haji, Sharif, Edmonton-Decore (NDP)*
Long, Martin M., West Yellowhead (UC)
Metz, Luanne, Calgary-Varsity (NDP)
Rowswell, Garth, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright (UC)
Sabir, Irfan, Calgary-Bhullar-McCall (NDP)
Singh, Peter, Calgary-East (UC)
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UC)

* substitution for Irfan Sabir

Also in Attendance

Irwin, Janis, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood (NDP)

Support Staff

Shannon Dean, KC	Clerk
Helen Cheng	Executive Assistant to the Clerk
Trafton Koenig	Law Clerk
Lianne Bell	Chief of Staff to the Speaker
Andrew Koning	Parliamentary and Engagement Coordinator
Aaron Roth	Committee Clerk
Terry Langley	Sergeant-at-Arms
Dave Ludwick	Executive Director of Corporate Services
Darren Joy	Senior Financial Officer
Lyndsay Tischer	Director of Human Resources
Amanda LeBlanc	Managing Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

9 a.m. Tuesday, November 26, 2024

[Mr. Cooper in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I'd like to call this meeting to order.

My name is Nathan Cooper. I'm the MLA for the outstanding constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills and the chair of this committee. I'd like to begin this morning by asking members and those joining us at the table to introduce themselves for the record. Upon doing that, I will call on members who have joined us remotely today. I'd like to begin to my right with the clerk of this committee, and then we'll go around the table in that direction.

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

Mr. Getson: Shane Getson, MLA, Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland, better known as God's country, and deputy chair of this show.

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

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

Mr. Langley: Terry Langley, Sergeant-at-Arms.

Ms Bell: Lianne Bell, Speaker's office.

Mr. Koning: Andrew Koning, Speaker's office.

Mr. Eggen: Dave Eggen, MLA for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Haji: Sharif Haji, MLA for Edmonton-Decore.

Ms Gray: Good morning, everyone. Christina Gray, MLA for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Metz: Good morning. Luanne Metz, MLA for Calgary-Varsity.

Ms Tischer: Good morning. Lyndsay Tischer, director of human resources for the Legislative Assembly Office.

Mr. Joy: Darren Joy, senior financial officer.

Mr. Koenig: Trafton Koenig, Law Clerk.

Dr. Ludwick: Dave Ludwick, executive director.

Ms Dean: Shannon Dean, Clerk.

The Chair: I would like to also note for the record that Mr. Haji is an official substitution for Mr. Sabir.

Before we turn to the business at hand, a few operational items. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of the meeting can be accessed on the Legislative Assembly website. Those participating remotely – and I'll ask you to introduce yourselves in a moment – are encouraged to please turn on your camera while speaking and mute your microphone when you're not speaking. Members participating virtually who wish to be placed on the speakers list are asked to e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to signal to the chair by raising your hand. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

I see a member has joined us, who had joined us remotely. If you could introduce yourself for the record, and then I'll ask Mr. Singh to do the same.

Mr. Long: Martin Long, the MLA for West-Yellowhead.

The Chair: Mr. Singh.

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

The Chair: Good morning, Peter.

That brings us to item 2, the approval of the agenda. Are there any proposed revisions, additions for today's meeting agenda? If not, would a member like to move that. Member Yao. Is there any discussion? All those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no.

Member Singh, in favour?

Mr. Singh: Aye.

The Chair: That motion is carried.

That brings us to item 3, the approval of the meeting minutes. The meeting minutes were circulated with the committee documents last week. Are there any additions, omissions, or errors that a member would like to bring to our attention? If not, would a member be willing to move the approval of the minutes? Member Eggen. Is there any discussion? Seeing and hearing none, all those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no.

Member Singh.

Mr. Singh: Aye.

The Chair: The motion is carried and so ordered.

For the substantive portion of our meeting today we'll move to item 4, the 2025-2026 Legislative Assembly budget parameters document. For the purposes of the committee this is a document that is prepared that will set out the parameters for the Legislative Assembly staff to prepare the Legislative Assembly budget, that we will approve at a later meeting. The budget parameters for the Legislative Assembly: I'd like to provide the committee with an overview of the Legislative Assembly fiscal year 2025-2026. I will then invite the Clerk, Shannon Dean, KC, to provide further comments regarding some specific elements of the budget parameters, and after that point I'll open the floor to some discussion.

By way of background, the Legislative Assembly's current fiscal year budget is approximately \$84.8 million, consisting of three main components: MLA administration at \$39.3 million, the Legislative Assembly Office branch budget and special funding for Electoral Boundaries Commission at \$36 million, and the caucus budgets of approximately \$9.5 million.

I have had some preliminary discussions with the Legislative Assembly administration to plan for a number of increases based on salary adjustment, special projects, inflation, and operational requirements. These items are summarized in the budget parameters document that was provided to you in advance of this meeting.

I'd like to start with an estimate of the number of hours that the House is expected to sit during the fiscal year. It is assumed that the House will sit for 75 sessional days with an average of 25 hours per week, a total of 20 weeks, and 75 committee meetings averaging three hours per meeting, or 225 hours in total.

Inflation will continue to impact the cost of doing business for the Legislative Assembly. Thus we propose an inflationary factor of 2 per cent to operational budgets across the Legislative Assembly Office. That is for constituency office funding, MLA administration,

and the Legislative Assembly Office branch budgets. This is based on the Conference Board of Canada's projected consumer price index for Alberta for 2025.

The key area pertains to staffing costs. The LAO parallels and is consistent with the Alberta public service compensation plans for opted-out and excluded nonmanagement and management employees. The Clerk will walk us through how the LAO plans to carve out budgets to make changes to stay in lockstep with the Alberta public service compensation adjustments for all staff.

With respect to MSA and caucus budgets, factors will be applied to the labour components of these budgets such that MSA staffing components indicated in the constituency service order RMSC 1992, c. C-1, 1(3)(a)(ii) and approximately 70 per cent of caucus budgets for staffing will be updated to reflect the pay and merit adjustments for those eligible.

Before asking Shannon to provide more detail, I will briefly list a number of proposals that address operational improvements and special funding requirements. Chamber upgrade project. Members will know that some of the technology that supports our work in the Chamber is over 20 years old, and we have experienced a number of technological glitches in the past few years due to that outdated technology, including and not limited to the loss of audio on our broadcast on a number of occasions in the previous year. Starting this year, the LAO will begin work on modernizing the Chamber's audio and visual equipment and will continue that work over the summer of 2025. The Clerk will detail the funding that has been set aside to support this work.

With respect to member service allowances, a 2 per cent inflation factor will be applied to the operational portion of MLA administration expenses. Caucus and branch budgets will be adjusted to reflect the 2 per cent inflation factor as well as a 3 per cent merit increase for eligible managers and 4 per cent for eligible staff. A contingency of 4 per cent has been allocated to accommodate any future market adjustments to compensation budgets for management and opted-out and excluded nonmanagement employees of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. I'll ask Shannon to review this in detail shortly.

Last year when the committee considered the fiscal year of 2024-2025 budget parameters, we included an amount to support the activities related to the forthcoming Electoral Boundaries Commission. As you know, an Electoral Boundaries Commission will be established under the Electoral Divisions Act to make proposals to the Legislative Assembly as to the area, boundaries, and names of electoral divisions in Alberta.

As outlined in the previous budget parameters document, the LAO is currently implementing an update to the HRS payroll, financial, and accounting systems to provide a contemporary integrated enterprise resource planning system. Shannon will present the fiscal year 2024-2025 impact of the project and its completion.

9:10

Before we open the table for discussion, I would like to call upon Shannon, the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, to provide further information on the proposed budget.

Ms Dean: Thanks, Speaker Cooper. I'm going to touch upon the key special funding requirements that were highlighted in the Speaker's comments. The most significant one is the Chamber upgrade project. We're proposing a \$2.45 million special funding request for that project for fiscal year 2025-26. This is a three-year project. It would have work being done, including upgrades to members' desks, cabling network equipment upgrades, electrical work. All of this is being planned so it will be completed prior to

the next general election. We will be requesting additional funds in fiscal year 2026-27 to complete the project.

In addition, the Speaker mentioned the Electoral Boundaries Commission. Members are well aware that a commission must be appointed within the near future to make proposals to the Assembly regarding electoral divisions. The LAO provides extensive support to the commission, and we are proposing for the fiscal year '25-26 an amount of \$1.5 million to support the commission. These funds will deal with expenses relating to public meetings, advertising, travel, IT requirements, and other costs.

The next area that I want to touch on is the LAO's ERP project, or the enterprise resource planning project. As the Speaker outlined, we have been working on a project to update our human resource payroll, financial, and accounting systems to a contemporary ERP system. Since the committee last met, the project has made tangible progress such that the team will be going live with its phase 1 implementation in June 2025. Phase 1 will include core functionality required for payroll accounting and reporting, and the future phases will include expense management, talent acquisition, performance management, and reporting upgrades. For the forthcoming fiscal year we're looking at a \$1.325 million special funding requirement. We will keep members up to date as we complete the remaining milestones associated with the project.

The next area I want to touch upon is related to staffing costs. As the Speaker mentioned, compensation for the LAO parallels what's in place for the Alberta public service for management and opted-out/excluded nonmanagement employees. As in previous years for fiscal year '25-26 we will prepare a budget assuming a merit increase of 3 per cent for those management employees who are eligible and 4 per cent for opted-out/excluded nonmanagement employees who are eligible. Appropriate adjustments will also be made to reflect changes relating to the employer portions of statutory deductions and benefits.

In addition, we're proposing a contingency of 4 per cent to be included in the budget to accommodate any future general market adjustments to compensation for staff. These funds will cover salary adjustments for all staff: branch employees, caucus, and constituency employees.

Finally, we are also proposing to carry over a contingency for pending decision items related to this committee's review of compensation benefits and allowances.

In summary, the key cost drivers for next year's budget relate to the Chamber upgrade project, the ERP project, and contingency funds associated with market adjustments for staff.

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

The Chair: Thank you, Shannon.

If I could just make a couple of quick additional notes with respect to the remarks particularly around the Chamber upgrade. It will be a complete rework of all of the wiring that is unseen inside the Chamber, a complete upgrade to the audio system inside the Chamber. It will also require the Chamber to be entirely closed to the public, including tours of the gallery, for essentially the entire break between the end of the spring session and the fall session, so hopefully mid-May, depending on decisions of the Assembly, to the middle of October for the next two years. It is a significant project.

I just wanted to make a note on the ERP program of the significant progress that we've seen. I know that many members have commented about how they appreciate the ability to access a lot more of their financial resources and make expense claim submissions on their mobile devices. This is the continuation of that but a little bit more on the back end for how HR and FM and our constituencies also communicate. So lots of great progress that's being made there.

I would just like, before I open it to comments, to remind members of the committee that the budget parameters document isn't the budget document, so we're not talking specifics today about line items that you may be excited about in the future, more a general sense given to the Legislative Assembly Office for them to go and then complete the budget preparation for us. I would anticipate that they'll come back mid-January for us to have a more in-depth discussion on that budget for us to have it approved by late January for us to have it over to Finance for the inclusion in the larger budget that, of course, by legislation must be tabled before the end of February.

With that, I'm happy to open it up for discussion. Member Getson, followed by Member Gray, followed by Member Eggen.

Mr. Getson: Yeah. I really appreciate the work going on with the hardware audio upgrades. How many years does that buy us? Are we anticipating for the next 10 to 15 years it's good to go, or what are we looking at?

Dr. Ludwick: The current technology has been in place for about 20 years. I would say 10, 15, 20, you know, certainly quite a few Legislatures.

Mr. Getson: Yeah. Okay. Appreciate it. Thank you.

The Chair: The thing that I might add is that the technology going in will hopefully be the same technology in a period of time, so we'll be able to use all of the wires and the actual nuts and bolts of the back end for a really long time. Then we'll see about the other changes.

Member Gray, please.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. Yes, also curious about the Chamber upgrade work. Two questions. I believe the Clerk mentioned additional funds will be asked for in 2026-27. Do you know – because this is \$2.45 million – what is the request next year?

Ms Dean: One point two million dollars.

Ms Gray: One point two million dollars. Okay. So that's a big project.

I'm curious. When we were going through COVID, lots of different Legislatures moved to more of a virtual way of operating, and I know we had a lot of barriers to be able to do that. Do these upgrades potentially allow that conversation to continue in a more easy way?

The Chair: I would say that the upgrades provide all of the technology on the back end that potentially would allow for that if that was a decision that the Assembly wanted to undertake in the future. In conjunction with the Ministry of Infrastructure the Assembly did undertake a significant review of this project, and a number of those items were contemplated in that review. Members of the Assembly provided a lot of feedback, and those who drafted the report contacted members of both caucuses and offered the opportunity. It is contemplated. Of course, that would be a decision of the Assembly.

The other thing that I might just say is that this year on the upgrade is largely wiring, back-end technology that folks won't see, and then next year is actual physical changes to both the Chamber, the dais area, as well as members' desks, that will require a certain amount of millworking, changing of microphones, all those wires. That sort of work will take place next year in a much more visible way compared to this year.

Any other questions, Member Gray?

Ms Gray: No. Thank you.

The Chair: David.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. Thanks. It sounds like a lot of renovations, especially in the second year. Have plans been made for any contingency if we're not able to use the Chamber for debate? Like, where would we go?

9:20

The Chair: I mean, the Legislative Assembly Office does have a business continuity plan that includes a number of off-site locations in the event of a global pandemic, a fire. In the larger plan there are other locations. I would say that there's a high level of confidence in this year that the audio upgrades will be able to take place in the time allotted. Going much deeper than the fact that there are a number of places that have been identified for us to meet in case of an emergency but are not anticipated to be needed to be used particularly in this year, then we would be looking at the following year if there were any sorts of potential challenges. But, certainly, we will know any of that concern by early July, and we would have a discussion amongst this committee and others if there were additional concerns about completion for us to meet there.

There's a great community hall close to where I live. We could meet there if you want.

To Banff, I think, is where we would go.

Ms Gray: Go back to the historic first Legislature down the street.

The Chair: Yes, back to the hockey rink.

Are there other questions, comments, concerns with respect to the budget parameters document? Mr. Haji.

Mr. Haji: Yeah. From the Clerk, if I get it right, there will be a 3 per cent increase for management and an additional 4 per cent contingency. Can you clarify that a bit?

Ms Dean: Yeah, that's correct. We build into the budget, as in all fiscal years, for those employees who are eligible to move along the grades. It's 3 per cent for management and 4 per cent for opted-out and excluded. We're also building in a contingency in connection with any anticipated market adjustments of 4 per cent for all staff.

The Chair: That includes the work that the subcommittee on member compensation and benefits is undertaking. That 4 per cent contingency includes what may or may not come out of that committee. Of course, we don't know all of the details of that yet, which is why the contingency is there.

I think it's important to reiterate that we'll also reflect what happens in the public service. That gives us a guide to build the budget from, but it's not necessarily an indication that it will be 4 per cent.

Mr. Haji: Is it exceptional for these parameters, or has it been traditionally done, that we have built in a contingency in the parameters?

The Chair: For the past couple of years there has been built-in contingency, yeah.

Any other questions with respect to the budget parameters document? Seeing and hearing none, there's a proposed motion that the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services approve the 2025-2026 budget parameters document for the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, presented to the committee on November 26, 2024, as distributed and direct the Legislative Assembly Office to prepare the 2025-2026 budget estimates in accordance with the approved budget parameters document.

Is anyone willing to move that motion? Member Getson. Are there any additional questions, comments, concerns, or debate with respect to the motion, which we now have on the screen for everyone to peruse?

Seeing and hearing none, all those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. In my opinion, the ayes have it.

Member Singh.

Mr. Singh: Approve. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. That brings us to item 5. There was a draft motion circulated to members of the committee. I'll turn it over to the mover of that motion for some introductory comments.

Member Getson.

Mr. Getson: I appreciate it. I'm going to call you the Speaker, but I guess they call you the chair in this committee. Essentially what we've seen here is some pressure for the last number of years. When we were reviewing this, it hadn't been updated for a long time. I believe 13 years ago was the last time that we looked at it. Back in 2012 the rate was \$193 per day. If anyone has tried to rent a hotel in the big city of champions, it's very challenging to do that, especially when there are other events taking place. The proposal would max it at \$350 a day to allow for those event times, not to exceed that. Moreover, really the underlying part is capping it for the fiscal year, \$26,400 per fiscal year. For those that are renting, no more than \$2,200 per month to make sure that there is some continuity there.

Several jurisdictions in Canada have this member's allowance. British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Quebec, Ontario, and the House of Commons obviously have something similar to what we do here. Alberta's current limit stands at \$23,160, which is lower than British Columbia, Ontario, and the House of Commons.

Bank of Canada inflation: if the committee would accept the amendment as proposed, it would also be to tie it to CPI, the cost of inflation. We would tie that to Statistics Canada. If it was either upwards pressures or downwards pressures going forward, it would kind of have that anchor. According to Alberta's Economic Dashboard, the daily room rate for downtown Edmonton in September 2024 was \$201. Again, it doesn't exceed the values we're looking at here.

A lot of times what was happening with some of the members from out of town: they were having to pay out of pocket even though they were trying to rent. It was just a little bit of wording, looking at modernizing the wording, making sure we've got a rate that kind of makes sense, and then tying any of those adjustments to CPI going forward.

With that, I guess, would you like me to move the motion itself?

The Chair: The motion was circulated as a document on the internal committee website, so most of you should have that.

Member Gray.

Ms Gray: I was just wondering if it's possible to put the draft member allowance amendment order up on the screen for people? Like, we won't read it, but can you have it up?

The Chair: Shane, can you read the motion as it is, as distributed, just those actual words?

Mr. Getson: Sure. I would like to move that the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services approve the Members' Allowances Amendment Order 2024 as distributed.

The Chair: Thank you. We'll pull up that document and display it on the screen, Member Gray.

Mr. Getson: If you can just make it smaller. We can all get our fine print glasses out. I was joking on making it smaller.

The Chair: Okay. Questions, comments, concerns? I think that's what you were also getting my attention for, Christina. Is that correct?

Ms Gray: Yes. Absolutely. Thank you for putting that up.

I am definitely curious how you came to the \$2,200 per month or roughly \$220 per day. That's a 14 per cent increase compared to the current rate of \$193, if you could speak to that.

Mr. Getson: Yeah, I sure can. It's a great question, too. Once we started looking at it back in 2012, if you look at how much things have inflated since 2012, we took a mean average of the rates that were in the Edmonton city area. Then we looked at some of the outliers when you had special events which happened to coincide with some of the sitting days. Then that's how we kind of came up with that rough figure of the \$350, not to exceed \$350. Then taking that out on the average rate and multiplying it over the calendar year, that gave us the mean average. That's how we came up with the numbers.

9:30

The Chair: Member Gray, go ahead.

Ms Gray: Thank you. Can the member explain the rationale behind making this retroactive? If I am reading the section at the bottom, so on the next page, it appears to read that this will come into force April 1, 2024. If I'm not mistaken, this is an increase of \$230, or 14 per cent, each month. If it's retroactive to April 1, 2024, we've already gone through seven months. That's nearly \$2,000 for this fiscal year so far. If you could speak to that.

Mr. Getson: Yeah, absolutely, and another great question, too. A number of our members that we had conversations with, due to the rates that we're experiencing in Edmonton, in the capital region, during this sitting – and that's where it really came off the table for a lot of folks. They were for the first time seeing this, where they were paying out of pocket. The way the rates were for, firstly, the hotel rental, the way the old wording was, caught that a number of members were actually paying out of pocket, so we'd want to make sure that they were kept whole during the calendar sitting during that year. Then the other one was just literally the inflationary causes and costs going up, increases. So, again, the intent is to try to keep the members whole to cover some of the out-of-pocket costs they've had during the calendar year in the city.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. I'm absolutely curious. We have talked in this legislative session quite a bit about the affordability crisis, cost of living, rents in particular, everything from introducing a private member's bill, Bill 205, to put in a temporary rent freeze for Albertans, because these pressures are impacting everyday families. Can you talk a little bit about bringing forward this motion of a 14 per cent increase for MLAs when the overall conversation about rents with this current government has seemed to go nowhere. I'm curious about how you're thinking this through.

Mr. Getson: No different for the folks following this at home that follow in the Legislative Assembly. I think both groups are in violent agreement of the affordability crisis, cost of inflation pressures, everything that's being experienced out there. I think the subtle nuances with respect to what you're putting forward is in a different way of how we approach these items. I don't know that

the two coalesce with what we're talking about here other than we're experiencing cost pressures. We're seeing that right across the board, and we're seeing the same inflationary pressures right across the board for everybody regardless of where you work or where you live.

Ms Gray: Agreed. Cost pressures for everyone. I'm only seeing a solution for MLAs in the form of this Members' Services adjustment order.

Mr. Getson: Oh, I see what you're trying to get at here. You're suggesting that from our side we're not addressing the affordability crisis for all Albertans? That's a subject of debate in the House. I don't believe that we've ever had anything different than agreeing; again, in violent agreement that there are cost pressures for everybody. I believe that the loyal opposition's approach, if they were in government, would be different than what we're doing, but it doesn't negate the fact that we're dealing with the affordability crisis, we're dealing with the economic pressures, and we're dealing with the ability to have affordable housing. We just take a different approach than you do.

The Chair: Member Gray, or are there other questions? I have David as next on the list. Go ahead.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. Thank you. Well, I find this amendment to be incredibly tone deaf considering what all Albertans are experiencing here in the province of Alberta right now, the government choosing to look for ways to alleviate their own problems with accommodation while Albertans are suffering from the worst inflationary pressures on housing that we've ever seen, really, for a generation. I'm particularly concerned about this retroactive compensation, giving, you know, people money back, right? People have, MLAs have, some people have mortgages, some people are renting, some people take hotels. Have you even thought this through? Like, how would you compensate people? I mean, you're putting more than \$2,000 on the table plus this extra amount for rent or accommodation. Like, how are you going to manage this retroactive part, giving, you know, more than \$2,000 to people for rent or mortgages or hotels that they've already spent from last April?

The Chair: The Clerk has a comment with respect to the . . .

Ms Dean: Just in terms of how we manage the expenses associated with temporary residences, there would have to be actual receipts for real costs for that period of time before we would process anything.

Mr. Getson: And then I can go to the first part of what the member had said. It pains me to remind the member that they actually have folks that are out of town now, too, not from Edmonton in their caucus. This is also for all Members of the Legislative Assembly, so this shouldn't be a partisan issue. Your members from Calgary I'm sure have experienced the same pressures that our folks have. This is with the whole intent of making sure that those who have experienced those cost pressures are kept whole, that they're not out of pocket. Again, this hasn't been reviewed since 2012; a few things have changed since 2012.

Mr. Eggen: Well, my responsibility is to the people of Alberta, right? It's not a partisan issue or monies to MLAs. It's to ensure that we have equitable not just laws but intent and messaging to everyone in Alberta. That's why I sit at this table and object to this most strenuously.

Mr. Getson: And to comment back to the . . .

The Chair: Oh. Hang on. Hang on. Hang on. It's okay. Member Metz.

Dr. Metz: Thank you. Yes, I'm from out of town and dependent on this allowance, and for sure myself and several of my colleagues who are from out of town have experienced the cost pressure. It's very real. Some people had very significant increases in rent over the last few months. That isn't the debate.

The fact that this has been going on a very long time – there are many people that I have worked with in prior roles as well that have not had any change in their compensation over many, many, many years, yet still face these cost pressures. My concern is that we should be doing the same for us as we do for Albertans, and it needs to look like we're doing the same for us as we're doing for Albertans, not, you know, we have to do it, and it has to look like that.

This doesn't look like that. I would have a very difficult time saying – I can argue, as you have, very honestly that the costs are going up, but what are we doing for other people? I cannot support this motion. Just have to suck it up as far as the costs are concerned.

Mr. Getson: Yeah. For the member's edification, too, there were a number of us that were elected in 2019, and while we were governing, we gave ourselves a haircut of 5 per cent. We still haven't, you know, reviewed that at all.

Again, the comments that I made for Member Gray hold true, Dr. Metz, for yourself as well. The approach that we take for Albertans and on their behalf is different than potentially what your position would be, but it doesn't take away from the intent of what we're doing to ensure that Albertans have a bright place to work, live, and play and to address the affordability of housing cost pressures, et cetera. A number of things that we really wish that you would help us get outside with is helping get rid of the carbon tax, because that is one of the things that we see causing the most inflationary pressures. So if you want to help us with that, I would be more than happy to have that conversation.

The Chair: Member Haji.

Mr. Haji: Yeah. I do represent a riding that has higher than average rentals in the province. I'm struggling to understand how I will explain to those renters in Edmonton-Decore that the Legislative Assembly did not come up with a solution, or the government did not come up with a solution to address the current, as we all agree, crisis in terms of the rent increase, 40 per cent in both Edmonton and Calgary. Saying that, yes, some of the members have to bump up the rent in Edmonton because it's higher, but for those 56,000 Edmontonians who are renting and experiencing the pressure, how will you help me explain to them?

9:40

Mr. Getson: I'd love to answer this one, too. I have a ton of speaking points of what our government is doing to help deal with the affordability crisis. I'd be more than happy to share those with you and come to your constituency and have an open town hall with you, if you wish, to talk about all the items that we're trying to do to address the issues.

The Chair: Go ahead. You can have a follow-up here. Go ahead.

Mr. Haji: I am shocked at you saying there are speaking points. I am wondering about solutions, not speaking points.

Mr. Getson: The solutions are in the speaking points. If you want to do this, again, it's honest and genuine. I would be more than happy to meet with you after the meeting, and I would be more than happy to go to a town hall with you and talk about all the policies and improvements that we're doing to address the affordability crisis that we have and also with the stock and the inventory for rental properties as well as trying to bring the cost pressures down. I would be more than happy to do that with you. The speaking points are talking about the policy that we're implementing, and I'd be more than happy to help you with that and even to help tweak up your own messaging if you need.

Mr. Yao: If these changes go through, can a person opt out? Can someone say: we do not wish to acknowledge this?

The Chair: Any member can claim the amount of their actual costs up to the monthly amount proposed in the amendment. So any member could opt out entirely from the temporary capital residence should they choose to do so.

Member Gray.

Mr. Yao: Thank you.

Ms Gray: Can the Clerk tell us how many of our 87 MLAs use the accommodations allowance? Anyone with Edmonton at the front of their name but a few others as well, I believe. In front of their riding name I mean.

Ms Dean: I'm looking to my SFO for that clarification.

Mr. Joy: I think there are approximately 63 that are eligible, but some of those are, you know, within 60 kilometres, just outside of that. So some people choose to commute rather than stay.

Ms Gray: Sixty-three eligible? Fantastic.

Mr. Joy: Roughly, yeah. I don't have the exact number in front of me.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you.

Just to address a couple of the comments that have been made by Member Getson. You're a hundred per cent correct when you say that we would take a different approach to the rental crisis that is going on. I appreciate you putting that on the record.

I would also remind the member that we are currently in a Legislative Assembly committee, and the committee can choose to accept or reject this and it could be different from what the government chooses to do, potentially. I know that I cannot support this. I cannot support a 14 per cent increase in the middle of my constituents in Edmonton-Mill Woods having seen nothing but rent pressures.

The Official Opposition is bringing this to the Legislative Assembly repeatedly, dozens and dozens of times over this session, whether it's about affordable housing or whether it's about rent, whether it's Bill 205 suggesting a temporary rent cap because there was so much pressure, and it's been nothing but rejection from the government. I would love to see the committee reject this allowance adjustment of a 14 per cent increase and acknowledge the very real crisis that's happening for Alberta families.

To do otherwise, I am worried, will be tone deaf and will certainly not be received very well by the public. I don't think that our constituents would be supportive of a 14 per cent increase for ourselves. As an Edmonton MLA I don't use the accommodation allowance, but I think that's how it will be perceived.

The Chair: Are there others wishing to speak?

Mr. Getson: May I respond, please?

The Chair: Maybe just respond through the chair. It might be helpful.

Mr. Getson: Through the chair to the member, I appreciate the education lesson of how a committee works. I do appreciate that wholly. For the member's edification, again, I'm not a member of government; I'm a private member. For the comments that were made from the member regarding affordability, I believe honestly that some of the best work that we can ever do is in committees. I've said that a number of times to the committees that I chair. So to make this a political nature of what could be debated in the House is in my opinion what seems to be taking place here in a lot of it. For the record, since the member seems to be trolling, I, too, do not take any of these compensations as I commute every single day.

The Chair: Are there others?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call the question.

Member Gray.

Ms Gray: Thank you so much. I appreciate that, Mr. Speaker. So if there are 63 MLAs who access this top-up, assuming that they don't opt out, I'm just curious. Over \$100,000 is the potential cost to this fiscal year alone, never mind future years. Is that accurate? I want to make sure I haven't done this incorrectly.

The Chair: As with all MLA administration costs, it is difficult to know exactly the number because some members will claim portions of those benefits; some will not. You know, I think generally that's accepted, what would be budgeted as if all eligible members will take the benefit. That's how MLA administration is budgeted, but at no point in time in the LAO's history have all MLA administration costs been disbursed, if that makes sense.

Member Irwin, I know that you joined the committee meeting a little bit after its opening, so perhaps before speaking, you can introduce yourself for the record, and then you can proceed with your remarks. For the benefit of the committee any member of the Assembly can attend any committee meeting, so welcome here. It's good to have you. Only members of the committee or official substitutes – in this case Member Haji is an official substitute – are able to vote on any motion.

Member Irwin, if you want to introduce yourself and then please proceed with your remarks.

Member Irwin: Thank you. Thank you, Chair, for the warm welcome. My name is Janis Irwin. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. Yeah. Grateful to join this committee today because I'm quite alarmed by what I'm seeing.

I just wanted to echo a little bit of what the member beside me from Edmonton-Mill Woods noted. I worry very much about the optics of this. I know we've been on other committees before where we've flagged that this is going to be an issue for your members as well. You know, I've spoken many, many times in the Legislature about the affordability crisis and about rents in particular. We know the data from Rentals.ca is clear that Edmonton has been number one for more than a year in rental increases. We don't have the highest rents, but our rents are increasing faster than anywhere else in Canada among major cities. Calgary was also up there on the leaderboard, but now I think they're number two.

Regardless, this is an issue for my constituents, for my colleagues' constituents. I hear from countless folks every single day, especially in my area of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, where people are facing astronomical rent increases and simply have nowhere to go. So I'd like to echo the question from my

colleague about how you're going to be able to justify this for your constituents. Perhaps, Member, you don't hear as much from your constituents, but I guarantee you that your urban colleagues do, because a lot of them CC me on their e-mails. How are you going to justify this to your constituents and to the residents of Alberta?

The Chair: Garth is the next on the list.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. There's a difference here between where you live and where you work. I have inflationary pressures at home. My wage is to cover that. I have never ever been asked to pay part of my lodging when I was asked to go work somewhere. In the case of talking to some existing members, they're subsidizing out of their pocket, you know, \$300 or \$400 a month. Mine is within the range, so I'm able to cover my cost, but I've never been asked – when I worked for someone, I had to submit supporting documents showing “this is what the hotel cost me; this is whatever,” and the person that I was working for covered those expenses because I was asked by them to come and do that.

I think all we're trying to do here is make it high enough that people don't have to subsidize their lodging and still have to have the documents in order to support that number. I think there's a difference between where you work and where you live.

9:50

The Chair: Are there others? Member Irwin.

Member Irwin: Yeah. I mean, a suggestion might be: oh, could you try to find a cheaper place to rent? You probably can't, especially in Edmonton. I guess my proposal would be that if you're going to proceed with this – I don't want to presuppose the decision of the committee. But if you are going to, could we ask that your government implement some of the many solutions we've offered, including rent caps, including an increase in rent supplements, which we've not seen in the last few budgets? We've seen minimal increases. The need is there. Our constituents are asking for it.

If you're going to push forward this motion that's optically quite troubling, then let's pair it with some solutions for the real Albertans who are struggling every single day.

The Chair: Are there others wishing to speak?

Mr. Getson: Again, Member Irwin, I appreciate your comments. Again, rent pressures and cost controls or cost issues are paramount right across the province. I think it's been debated at length in the House about some of the proposals that you guys have had. We're simply taking a different approach to cover those. A lot of the metrics that we've seen and a lot of the proposals that you've made just aren't effective in other jurisdictions that have done that.

Again, I would propose no different than the hon. member to your left. I'd be more than happy to come and speak to your constituents and talk about some of the things that we're looking to do in the affordability file. As a private member I'd absolutely offer that.

The Chair: Member Gray.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. I've had the chance to, I think, redo the calculations. Should it be used, it's over \$200,000 for this 14 per cent increase to the accommodation allowance that only MLAs can access. I just want to reiterate that I cannot support this.

I think it's out of touch. I think in the context that we are in and with what Albertans are experiencing, it is completely unacceptable that we are looking at a 14 per cent increase, essentially, for ourselves.

The Alberta NDP caucus does not support this and will be voting against it. I think that it really shows a disconnect from what Albertans are experiencing. I guess I should clarify that. You, obviously, are aware of what Albertans are experiencing because you're addressing it for MLAs, through the chair, but I have heard zero solutions offered for Albertans. We've got a clear solution, money on the table, in this case, for MLAs, yet Albertans' food bank usage is up, houselessness is up. We continue to see people in crisis. The casework that our offices deal with is constant, and a 14 per cent increase for MLAs is put forward by UCP private members. I just think that this is unacceptable for Albertans.

The Chair: Are there others wishing to comment on the motion?

Seeing and hearing none, I am prepared to call the question. Hon. members, as proposed by Member Getson, the motion as distributed, all those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. On the phone? Opposed?

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, can we have a recorded vote?

The Chair: A recorded division has been required. We will handle the recorded division as such. I will call in favour. Please raise your hand and indicate if you are. As a reminder for the benefit of the committee, members Eggen, Metz, Haji, and Gray are all voting members of the committee this morning. Then I will come to Member Singh, and he can indicate if he is voting in favour or opposed. I will ask that you turn your camera on for the recorded division.

Those in favour of the motion, please raise your hand. The clerk, Mr. Roth, will call out the members.

Mr. Roth: Mr. Getson, Mr. Rowswell, Mr. Yao, Mr. Long.

The Chair: All those opposed?

Mr. Roth: Dr. Metz, hon. Ms Gray, Mr. Haji, hon. Mr. Eggen.

The Chair: Member Singh, in favour?

Mr. Singh: I support.

Mr. Roth: Mr. Speaker, total for the motion, five; total against, four.

The Chair:

That motion is carried and so ordered.

That brings us to item 6, other business. Is there any?

The date of the next meeting will be at the call of the chair.

Motion to adjourn.

Mr. Yao: Right here.

The Chair: Member Yao. All those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. In my opinion, the ayes have it.

The committee is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 9:55 a.m.]

