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Public Accounts Committee

Legislative Assembly

May 3, 1978
10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. Taylor

Alberta Disaster Services

MR. CHAIRMAN: Will Public Accounts come to order, please. Today we have Alberta Disaster Services with us. But before calling on the hon. Dr. Horner for an opening statement, I want to ask Mr. Rogers to outline the procedures for the sections we're dealing with.

Before doing that, you've had the minutes. What's your pleasure in regard to the minutes? Moved by Mr. Doan that they be accepted. All in favor? Against, if any?

MR. McCRAE: Mr. Chairman, just before we get to the matter of the day, could I refer to the minutes of the meeting two weeks back when Mr. Rogers advised that because of amendments to The Financial Administration Act he was now responsible for auditing all the irrigation districts. The question then was whether he should report them all in public accounts, or none of them.

I've reviewed this matter with the esteemed Provincial Treasurer and his staff, and am advised and concur in their advice that because the irrigation districts do not qualify under the definition of provincial agency, then in fact they should not be reported in public accounts. There is provision under The Financial Administration Act for the Auditor General, by virtue of Section 19, to report on those bodies in his annual report, should he so wish.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Does the Auditor have any comments?

MR. ROGERS: No, I fully agree. It has been custom, going way back, to include certain irrigation districts in public accounts. I feel that in view of the decision, with which I agree as I said, I think I will not include them in the public accounts for '77-78, which of course still are to be finalized by the Provincial Auditor. I think the way in which this should be handled perhaps is to either show the accounts or refer to the accounts in the Auditor General's report, commencing with '78-79. I think that's all I have to say, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Any other comments? Is that satisfactory? All agreed?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay. Today we are being asked to study the Disaster Preparedness Emergency Response, vote 7, statement 82, page 176, public accounts volume 1. Mr. Rogers.

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MR. ROGERS: Mr. Chairman, page 175 is actually the first reference to Disaster Services. This statement is the expenditure by program for the Department of Executive Council. Vote 7 is shown as Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Response. The estimates were \$1,082,150. There was a special warrant in the year for \$190,000, making a total of funds provided of \$1,272,150, of which \$1,162,220 was expended.

On page 176 we have a further statement which shows the subprograms -- 7.1 being program support, 7.2 disaster preparedness, and 7.3 emergency response -- with the same program titles I picked up from the earlier statement. On page 177, statement 83, near the bottom of the page for vote 7 we see the expenditure was made up of \$701,125 for manpower, \$136,511 for supplies and services, \$298,316 for grants, and \$26,268 for purchase of fixed assets. This is shown in the last column but one of that statement.

If we now turn to page 180 there is a further analysis of the expenditure, showing the object codes within the main code groups. This is shown with the subprograms 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3, and the total program 7 shown in columnar form giving the details of the actual object codes of expenditures. On page 182 we have details of any revenue. Mr. Chairman, I think those are the main parts of public accounts involved.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Any questions for the Auditor? Thank you, Mr. Auditor.

At this time, then, I'd like to introduce our guests today: the hon. Dr. Hugh Horner, minister in charge and Deputy Premier; Mr. E. Tyler, the Executive Director of Alberta Disaster Services; and Mr. Herbert Westgate, the Assistant Director of Alberta Disaster Services. We welcome you, and at this time I'll ask the hon. Dr. Horner if he would like to make an opening statement.

DR. HORNER: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. Just very briefly, to alert the committee to the function of Disaster Services. As the committee will recall, the director of the organization was substantially changed in the early '70s with the introduction and passage through the Legislature of The Alberta Disaster Services Act, which changed the emphasis from the old style of military preparedness and the capacity to look after our particular province in case of a nuclear disaster. That capacity remains, of course, but the direction and the attention of the department has changed to being able to respond to civil disasters in a major way.

We feel that that legislation is a forerunner in Canada, and indeed have had many requests for it from other provinces and their desire to change their sort of emphasis in other provinces in a similar way to being able to handle civil disasters, which are quite frankly more likely than any other type. As a result of that, we've been dealing with floods, tornados, and all manner of disasters, including wild wells and that nature of thing that is so important in this province.

In addition to that, the executive director has headed in my view a very important interdepartmental committee relative to the manner of handling and transportation of hazardous materials. I'm sure we've all been alerted to some of the things that have happened in the United States relative to rail car explosions of hazardous materials. And it's important in this province. A considerable amount of work has been done and will continue to be done in monitoring and over-viewing that particular matter. In Canada of course standards of the kinds of equipment, the type and nature of regulations to this matter are a federal responsibility. But we have been working closely with the federal people. We're not sure when they're going to introduce their new bill, but it's certainly been in the drafting stage for a number of years. We've been working closely with them.

The only other matter I'd like to -- and it's sort of current at the moment because I think one member of the Legislature made some remarks relative to the question of Edmonton. Those were not really very accurate remarks. Edmonton, by the very nature of its position in North America and the very nature of having a very major airfield at Namao, has always been and will continue to be, I would suggest, a potential target in case of any nuclear war. None of us expect it, nor do we want it. But we have to be prepared to meet it.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I wanted to say sometimes it's not very exciting. But it demands a careful role of being prepared, being able to respond. I just want to say again that the dedication of the small group who run Alberta Disaster Services is impressive, in my view. They have been and are able to respond very quickly and effectively to all manner of disasters that have occurred in the province.

One word to members of the committee. We've been very careful not to use the terminology "disaster area" very readily for a number of reasons: one, we can move and help without that particular declaration. That particular declaration of a particular area in our province doesn't serve any useful purpose, unless it's an extreme disaster. So we've been very, very careful not to use that particular declaration unless it became absolutely essential. Because we can move otherwise, and there's always some fallout if you start declaring a particular area of the province a disaster area for one reason or another.

That fallout can sometimes hurt more than the actual disaster itself. I refer particularly to what happened in the southern part of the province last winter with the snowstorms and so on. We were able to move quickly and effectively, Mr. Tyler and his people co-ordinating -- that's really what they do is co-ordinate and get from other departments in government. In that particular case we used all levels of government to ensure that we were able to open the area up to transportation as quickly and as effectively as possible. As I say, all levels were involved: the county, the province, and indeed we even got the equipment from the federal government at Waterton. Everybody moved in and got the job done. It wasn't really necessary to declare the area a disaster area in that sense.

With those remarks, Mr. Chairman, we'd be pleased to try to answer any questions from the committee. Again I say I think the small group of dedicated people have done an extremely effective job being prepared, and encouraging municipalities throughout the province to be prepared in their own areas. An example of that was the situation at McMurray this spring. Compared to other times up there, with the experience they'd had and the assistance of our people they have a very effective mechanism now in McMurray to monitor and be aware of any potential problems that might arise in their area. I guess that is really the essence of what this group does: to make people aware and keep them aware of the potential problems that might occur in their communities. I think they've done a very good job.

MR. THOMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. For the information of the committee, and especially the Leader of the Opposition, I'd like to say that Disaster Services has been involved in my constituency in 1975 and 1977. I think they really supply the citizens of Alberta a real service, one that really isn't recognized to the extent it should be. I went to Regina last year with Mr. Tyler. I've only really got one question: it seems to me that when you have a natural disaster that is close to a border, either B.C. or Saskatchewan, there is a lack of integration between the governments in these areas. I'm

talking about things like forest fires, something like that. Is there any way you feel that this co-ordination could be increased over what it is at the present time?

DR. HORNER: Mr. Chairman, in response, I suppose we can always improve that kind of co-operation with other provinces. Each province has an organization. We are in touch with them. We've attempted to integrate our operations in Alberta, particularly with our neighbors on both sides, because that's the important part of it. There is an interprovincial council. We haven't had too many formal meetings, but informally they're in contact and work closely together. Indeed, the federal Emergency Measures people I think have a responsibility for that overall co-ordination. Of course a federal officer who works closely with Mr. Tyler is stationed in Alberta. All I can add is that we'll continue to try to improve that kind of co-operation, because our borders are just lines on a map and disasters don't really pay much attention to those lines.

MR. WOLSTENHOLME: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I haven't been very active over the last few years with this association, but I do concur that they do a good job. I'd like to express my appreciation for the help they gave us, particularly in the water well drilling for the towns in southern Alberta last summer. My question is: do we still send people to Armprior, or is Armprior still in existence?

DR. HORNER: Yes, Armprior is still operative. We send people from various departments, from a provincial point of view. We send down others from municipalities. Three people are going in a couple of weeks for the course. We keep tabs on all these people. While they might not be active all the time, we know where they are and we can call on them. We've had 52 candidates in '76-77 who went to Armprior. Seventeen were mayors, other elected officials, and that kind of thing. As I said, we send down people from the various departments.

I might just add, Mr. Chairman, each department of government has a person designated to work with Alberta Disaster Services as an emergency planning officer from that particular department. Out of this comes the co-ordination that Mr. Tyler needs when something happens and we don't have nor expect to build up the kind of resources that would be there, but rather we can call on any department to provide us with people, vehicles, or things to get the job done.

MR. WOLSTENHOLME: The hon. minister I think must have sensed my supplementaries. He has already answered them.

MR. LYSONS: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to ask the minister: in the event of a disaster -- let's say a rail car derailment in the middle of a town or city or a gasoline tanker blowing up or scattering gasoline for half a mile through the city -- just what power can Disaster Services have to mobilize people or evacuate people? What all-encompassing power do they have?

DR. HORNER: Mr. Chairman, as members may appreciate if they review The Disaster Services Act again, the power is substantial. That power of course should only be used on very rare occasions. But if necessary we have the power under the act to move people, to bring people in to do things, and to take property and other things that are required to deal with the situation. So the authority is there under the act. It requires a declaration.

There are some ties on that authority: we can only operate for a short period of time and then it has to be ratified by the Legislature. But certainly we have the authority to move quickly to get things done to avert a disaster or try to prevent it from becoming worse than what it might be. We have a 24-hour telephone response, and of course the executive directors in touch with and in consultation with the police and fire people in the province, and can mobilize those particular resources at a moment's notice.

MR. LYSONS: If a disaster occurs in the middle of Edmonton or wherever, the chief officer would be the mayor of the city. Is that not right? It's under this office?

DR. HORNER: The mayor would be. As an example, in the city of Edmonton he has the authority under the act also to declare a local disaster situation and then to do all the things that are necessary. That has to be approved by the minister in charge, then it flows from there. So the mechanisms are in place to deal with that. They have their own emergency planning officer. They work closely with our people. Our people spend a lot of their time in the training of municipal people throughout the province to be able to respond to a disaster in their particular area. These courses are ongoing and upgraded, and are really a year-round job that my people basically do.

MR. McCRAE: Mr. Chairman, the member from Vermilion was substantially into the question area. I wanted to probe a bit. But I'll carry on, if I might. Dr. Horner, with the growing chemical industry here in Alberta and the number of accidents that have happened in the United States -- LNGs, liquid natural gases, or poisonous chemicals have been derailed and have caused all sorts of havoc near major cities. Something we keep hearing about is the deterioration of the railbeds, the roadway system of railways. I'm just wondering, are we doing anything specifically in the way of preventive action to prevent or avoid a problem such as that? I'm thinking of such things as storage of the petrochemicals or chemicals outside urban areas, or insisting on a strengthening or preservation of railbeds in a safe condition. Can I get you to go into that area somewhat?

DR. HORNER: We've had discussions with both railways relative to that particular matter. As I mentioned earlier, Mr. Tyler is co-ordinating a task force of a variety of departments working with the federal government in their new Transportation of Hazardous Materials Act.

I would say this: fortunately I think in this province the major commodities we're talking about are on railbed that has been substantially upgraded. In discussions with Canadian National on Fort Saskatchewan, as an example, their explanation of why we haven't had the kind of problems they've had in some of the southern states is twofold: one, a better railbed, better rail; and better and more strict enforcement of safety measures in the sense of, one, really being strict on enforcement of what's called in the railway business the slow-orders, or reducing your speed to a level which has to be there for the safety of that particular commodity. Secondly, the regulations we have in Canada relative to valves and that kind of regulatory mechanism is much better than they've had in the United States. They're going to have to catch up to our kind of standards. That's not to say we couldn't have one. We did have a derailment of a propane car the other day. So it can happen. Fortunately again, in that particular case the propane was allowed to dissipate without any explosion or fire.

So I think it's an area we have to continue to be vigilant about, pretty obviously. We just have to make sure that those kinds of regulations that are now in place are enforced. As I noted earlier, when the new act comes in there will be even stricter regulatory mechanisms, particularly relative to tank car construction, truck construction, valves on the truck, all of these things which are really the important area in trying to prevent any disaster of that kind.

MR. McCRAE: I wonder, Dr. Horner, whether there are provisions in the regulations or statutes requiring the storage of these dangerous chemicals outside of populated areas -- not to put it in the rural areas, but suggesting on rural sidings.

DR. HORNER: I'm not aware, nor is Mr. Tyler, of any specific orders of that nature. The problem is, quite frankly, in my discussions with Canadian National relative to the problem in Fort Saskatchewan, that the plants themselves probably present more of a potential danger than the rail cars, trucks, or whatever, that might be moving on our rail lines or our highways. So it's a matter that I think we have to be pragmatic about. You're not going to help very much, as an example, by moving the rails out of Fort Saskatchewan if that car, once it's loaded, has then to go through innumerable smaller communities along the line. So it's really a matter I think of being continually vigilant. I don't really think it's going to help, and to my knowledge there is no sort of area zoning, or that kind of thing.

MR. McCRAE: Mr. Chairman, just one more question that has to do with the volume that might travel by rail as compared to truck. I wonder, are there substantial volumes going by truck? Are the truckers of a superior qualification as drivers? In other words, they're not putting some kid out there hauling a truck of dangerous chemicals through the cities and whatever.

DR. HORNER: I can't give you the sort of proportion of that amount that might go by rail and that amount that might go by truck. I think generally naturally the domestic usage of course is mostly carried by truck, but not entirely. Rail would be for the longer journeys, if you like. As to the matter of whether or not the truck driver has to have special qualifications, at the moment no, other than any truck driver has to have. You have to have a certain class of licence, depending on the size of the truck. But that is one of the things being considered in the new legislation now being put forward.

MR. CLARK: Mr. Chairman, I really don't have any questions other than simply to say to the hon. member from Cardston who initiated the discussion, if he'd care to check back to 1963 the Disaster Services or Emergency Measures people did a very fine job during a gigantic snowstorm in all of southern Alberta at that time.

We frankly have no questions of the gentlemen. We think they're doing a fine job in the area, and that may even surprise the minister.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Mr. Henkelman just distributed the annual report of Alberta Disaster Services for the year ending March 31, 1977.

MR. THOMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to get back to the annual report. I notice on page 29 there was a sour gas release at the Shell Waterton plant, which is in my

constituency. I was wondering just how you co-ordinated that program with the municipalities. Was the municipality itself involved in any way, the municipal officials? Or was it basically directly the organization itself that handled it? Secondly, how big a proportion of your work is done with the municipalities in general?

DR. HORNER: Essentially it is a municipal responsibility. Our role is to co-ordinate and provide people and materials that might be required to avert or control any disaster that might happen. The matter of sour gas is a particular concern to all of us in Alberta, because that is a part of our responsibility with the development of the resources that are there.

In the case of the Waterton one, the Pincher Creek people were the leaders. My people contacted them. Actually, we set up a communications network so that everybody knows what everybody else is doing and the people and materials are there. In that particular case of course the Shell Oil Company, who are the operators, have some very major responsibilities in a situation like that. Our role is to ensure that they carry out their responsibilities, that we assist the municipalities to do whatever is necessary to be done -- evacuate people or move supplies in. That's the way it operates. It operates effectively. But sour gas is one of those we're all aware of in this province at Waterton or Drayton.

I can remember spending a whole night with Mr. Tyler in New Norway with identification bands around our arms, making sure everything was in place and that police, Environment, Energy Resources Conservation Board, everybody was working together to effectively control that situation.

MR. WOLSTENHOLME: My colleague from Fort McMurray isn't here today. I was in his office the day he was alerted to the fact that there was apt to be trouble up there. What has happened?

DR. HORNER: Mr. Chairman, we did get a report that there was a high crest of the Athabasca coming down towards the town of Fort McMurray again this spring. I think from the experience of a year ago and a different set of circumstances, the spring runoff was handled by the river effectively. There was no flooding of any importance whatsoever. Both the Athabasca and the Clearwater are now running free.

There hasn't been any problem, as opposed to the interesting circumstances of a year ago where it was because of a lack of water that we had a flood. That's one of those crazy kinds of things that happens. There wasn't enough water in the river to move the sludge ice out. Therefore all the spring runoff flooded. But that was a particular circumstance at that particular time.

MR. LYSONS: I notice, Mr. Minister, that on at least two occasions you've had lost children and you've co-ordinated the rescue and safe return of these children. What would be some of the things you would do? For instance, if I'm a parent and I lose my little fellow, normally I would phone the RCMP and say, we've got a problem here. What happens then?

DR. HORNER: We get involved at the request of the particular police force. In the incident documented in the annual report, they requested a searchlight-equipped helicopter. We were able to get one from Namao. That's the kind of thing we do, again:

co-ordinating, responding to requests from a local municipality or local police force for assistance. That's when we then try to co-operate to the best of our ability.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Any further questions? If not, on behalf of the committee I'd like to thank you, Dr. Horner, Mr. Tyler, and Mr. Westgate, for being our guests and for giving us the information you gave us.

Is there any further business the committee wishes to conduct today? If not, a motion to adjourn would be in order. Moved by Mr. Hyland that the meeting adjourn. All in favor? The meeting stands adjourned.

(The committee adjourned at 10:50 a.m.)

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