



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Third Session

Standing Committee
on
Public Accounts

Tuesday, June 6, 2017
11:01 a.m.

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Third Session**

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Cyr, Scott J., Bonnyville-Cold Lake (W), Chair
Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (ND), Deputy Chair

Barnes, Drew, Cypress-Medicine Hat (W)
Fildebrandt, Derek Gerhard, Strathmore-Brooks (W)
Fraser, Rick, Calgary-South East (PC)
Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (ND)
Gottfried, Richard, Calgary-Fish Creek (PC)
Littlewood, Jessica, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (ND)
Loyola, Rod, Edmonton-Ellerslie (ND)*
Luff, Robyn, Calgary-East (ND)
Malkinson, Brian, Calgary-Currie (ND)
Miller, Barb, Red Deer-South (ND)
Nielsen, Christian E., Edmonton-Decore (ND)**
Panda, Prasad, Calgary-Foothills (W)
Renaud, Marie F., St. Albert (ND)
Turner, Dr. A. Robert, Edmonton-Whitemud (ND)
Westhead, Cameron, Banff-Cochrane (ND)

* substitution for Nicole Goehring

** substitution for Cameron Westhead

Also in Attendance

Nixon, Jason, Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre (W)

Office of the Auditor General Participants

Merwan Saher	Auditor General
Mary Gibson	Business Leader, Performance Audit Practice

Support Staff

Robert H. Reynolds, QC	Clerk
Shannon Dean	Law Clerk and Director of House Services
Trafton Koenig	Parliamentary Counsel
Stephanie LeBlanc	Parliamentary Counsel
Philip Massolin	Manager of Research and Committee Services
Sarah Amato	Research Officer
Nancy Robert	Research Officer
Corinne Dacyshyn	Committee Clerk
Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
Aaron Roth	Committee Clerk
Karen Sawchuk	Committee Clerk
Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications
Jeanette Dotimas	Communications Consultant
Tracey Sales	Communications Consultant
Janet Schwegel	Managing Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

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[Mr. Cyr in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee to order and welcome everyone in attendance.

My name is Scott Cyr, the MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake and chair of the committee. I'd ask the attendees at the table to introduce themselves for the record, starting to my right.

Mr. Dach: Lorne Dach, MLA, Edmonton-McClung, deputy chair.

Loyola: Rod Loyola, MLA for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Mr. Malkinson: Brian Malkinson, MLA for Calgary-Currie.

Mrs. Littlewood: Jessica Littlewood, MLA, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Ms Luff: Robyn Luff, MLA for Calgary-East.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

Mr. Nielsen: Chris Nielsen, MLA, Edmonton-Decore.

Ms Miller: Good morning. Barb Miller, MLA, Red Deer-South.

Mr. Fildebrandt: Derek Fildebrandt, Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Gotfried: Richard Gotfried, Calgary-Fish Creek.

Ms Gibson: Good morning. Mary Gibson, office of the Auditor General.

Dr. Massolin: Good morning. Philip Massolin, manager of research and committee services.

Mrs. Sawchuk: Karen Sawchuk, committee clerk.

The Chair: And I'd like to announce the members on the phones. If you're on the phone, can you please state your name and your constituency.

Mr. Barnes: Drew Barnes, Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Dr. Turner: Bob Turner, Edmonton-Whitemud.

The Chair: Okay. We do have two other members. Mr. Panda, can you please announce yourself for the group.

Mr. Panda: Sure. Good morning, Chair, and everyone there. This is Prasad Panda, MLA, Calgary-Foothills.

The Chair: Thank you.

The following substitutions are noted for the record: Mr. Nielsen for Mr. Westhead, Member Loyola for Ms Goehring.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand.

Mr. Fraser, can you please announce yourself to the group.

Mr. Fraser: Sure, Mr. Chair. Thanks. Rick Fraser, Calgary-South East.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

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The approval of the agenda. Do we have any members who would like to make changes or additions to the agenda?

Seeing none, would a member like to move the agenda?

Mr. Gotfried: So moved.

The Chair: Is there any discussion on the motion? All in favour? Any opposed? On the phones? Carried.

Do the members have any amendments to the May 30, 2017, minutes?

If not, would a member move those minutes? Member Loyola. Any discussion on the motion? All in favour? Any opposed? On the phones? Carried.

All right. The committee working group met on Tuesday, May 30, and again on Thursday, June 1, to compile the suggested schedule for both out-of-session meetings as well as regular meetings during the fall 2017 session. Members should have a copy of the draft schedule, which was posted on the internal committee website last week.

I will now open the floor for discussion and for any questions the committee members may have.

All right. Were there any additions to or deletions from the schedule?

Mr. Fildebrandt: A question.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Fildebrandt.

Mr. Fildebrandt: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just want to clarify that in the proposed fall/winter schedule that has been distributed by the clerk, the ministries invited will also be notified that agencies, boards, and commissions that report to that ministry will be expected to be here as well in the event that members wish to question those ABCs.

The Chair: It is my understanding on how this is, Mr. Fildebrandt, that the ministry called will have to have the agencies, boards, and commissions available to us should we wish to question them.

Was there any further discussion on this?

Okay. Would a member move the motion to approve the draft schedule as proposed or as revised.

Mr. Malkinson. Any discussion on the motion?

All in favour? Any opposed? On the phones? Thank you. This motion is carried.

The start and end times for PAC meetings during the session are currently listed as an hour and a half, from 8:30 till 10 a.m. Practically speaking, however, the committee meetings have ended anywhere from six to 10 minutes prior to 10 a.m. to provide members with the time to make it to the Chamber for the 10 a.m. start time of the morning sitting. The working group discussed the matter and agreed that the premeeting briefing should be shortened to permit an earlier meeting start time as well as to formally recognize an end time at 9:50. The working group's recommendation is that the times for the Public Accounts Committee meetings during the session be revised to 8 a.m. to 8:15 a.m., premeeting briefing, and 8:20 a.m. to 9:50 a.m., committee meeting.

Are there any discussions or questions regarding this time allocation change? Okay. It appears that late nights are working for us.

Mr. Nixon, would you take the opportunity to announce yourself while you're sitting at the table.

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. Sure. MLA Jason Nixon for the great riding of Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre.

The Chair: Okay. It appears that the consensus of the committee is that start and end times for the committee meetings during the session be changed to 8:20 to 9:50. Would there be somebody willing to move the motion that the start and end times for the meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts during the session be revised to 8:20 a.m. to 9:50 a.m.?

Mr. Malkinson: Mr. Chair, I was just wondering if I could comment, actually.

The Chair: Oh, for sure.

Mr. Malkinson: Thank you, Chair. Just as a point of clarity, I know that sometimes we've been in PAC meetings that have gone – I mean, Parliamentary Counsel, feel free to correct me. I believe the standing orders say that we can go right till 9:59, and then it automatically stops. With this time change, I just wonder whether, you know, we could actually be increasing the potential time for a meeting if we had one that went right up to 9:59. I believe that with these start and end times that wouldn't change. It would just potentially give us a little bit of extra time. I'm just curious if I'm interpreting that correctly.

11:10

The Chair: Well, the meeting would end at 9:50. What happens is that the intent is to not go over that meeting time, so I'm assuming that we would probably need consent from the committee to go beyond 9:50, which is typically what was happening. Did I answer your question, Mr. Malkinson?

Mr. Malkinson: Yes.

Loyola: Just for the record could we have Parliamentary Counsel attest that that is the case?

Dr. Massolin: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just for the record I'm not Parliamentary Counsel, but I would say that, yeah, definitely the meeting times are determined here to be, you know, the start and end time, and the committee would have to certainly consent to go over that time period, as you've indicated, Mr. Chair. The other point is just to reiterate that a committee of the Assembly cannot sit while the Assembly is in session without leave of the Assembly, but I don't think that's the situation here.

Thank you.

The Chair: Did that answer your question, Member Loyola?

Loyola: I wanted something on the record, sir.

The Chair: Oh, absolutely. That's the appropriate way of going.

Mr. Gottfried: Mr. Chair, I think I concur with Member Loyola. If we by unanimous consent can go to what the standing order time is, I think that allows us some latitude if there's something that's critical that we'd like to finish up, but if we have the block times, as you've stated in this motion, I think that would be acceptable.

Mr. Dach: I think that's a concern that other committee members have expressed, that right now we have a mandated hard stop at 10 o'clock, case closed. If we go to 10 minutes earlier to give us time to get, there's a chance that that hard stop may become a soft stop, and we can dribble in. I think that if we're going to debate this and come to a decision, we should agree that 9:50 means 9:50, hard stop.

The Chair: Can we have a friendly amendment saying that with unanimous consent we can go beyond 9:50, or would that not be needed?

Dr. Massolin: I think, as you've stated, Mr. Chair, that for this meeting time, the hour and a half that you've set out here ending at 9:50, the so-called hard stop is set as it would be for any other committee meeting and that the committee, as, again, you've indicated, would have to consent to going over that time regardless of whether or not, you know, you're butting up against a House sitting. I mean, we're going into a period where the House is not sitting, but I think that principle still applies.

Thank you.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Malkinson.

Mr. Malkinson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just one other comment is that I know that when we do the office of the Auditor General briefings, sometimes, depending on what the report is that's before us, those briefings can be relatively short. I do remember some meetings in the past where often, you know, the full half-hour is needed, and I just wonder what the proposal would be for that situation. I'm just expressing my personal hesitancy, perhaps.

The Chair: It will go from 8 to 8:15, 15 minutes. One of the suggestions the Auditor General's office has offered is to have our research staff make some time to sit with the Auditor General's office to be fully briefed. That way what happens is that you'll have time for your research staff, who usually actually create your question pool, if you will, to make sure that if they've got questions, they've got the opportunity to do that.

Now, the other option, which we had discussed at length, would be to push this back to a quarter to 8, 7:45. There wasn't a lot of enthusiasm for that solution, so the compromise was that – we're seeing a lot more of our premeetings going to 15 minutes and just kind of ending there, so it would be better just to utilize our time in actual on-the-record questions.

Mr. Malkinson: If I may make a suggestion, Mr. Chair, perhaps we could adjourn debate on this particular topic until maybe our September meeting. I think we're all tired from having been in the House quite late last night. It might make sense to sort of have us all think about this one a little bit and to address it – it should be quick – at our September meeting. If I may put that out as a suggestion.

The Chair: Mrs. Littlewood, please go ahead.

Mrs. Littlewood: I just have a question on how notification goes out to ensure that those that normally, you know, tune in at 8:30 or arrive in the public gallery at 8:30 would know that it starts at 8:20.

The Chair: Well, that is done through a press release and through the website as well. I can't imagine that that's going to change.

Mrs. Littlewood: Will there be a press release?

The Chair: There's a press release from the Alberta government for every meeting that we hold.

Mrs. Sawchuk: It comes through LAO communications.

The Chair: Sorry. It's on behalf of the committee.

Mr. Gottfried, you have a question?

Mr. Gottfried: Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I think that the offer from the Auditor General's office and the research team is actually

extremely helpful. As most of us have great research teams, the opportunity for them to meet sometime prior, which will, I'm sure, be by mutual agreement of our collective staff teams to do that – and I'm assuming that any MLAs that would like to attend that session would be allowed to attend as well – is, I think, much better because we'll have a chance to prepare.

My sense is that our prebriefings have been somewhat compressed, maybe because we're getting a little bit more experienced at doing it, and maybe people are researching the information provided in advance a little bit better. I think we can compress that and actually have a much better and more robust opportunity to have the preparatory material and a chance to ask questions.

I thank the Auditor General's office and our research team very much for making themselves available for that. I know they have very busy schedules. For us to have that opportunity, I think it will make us better.

The Chair: Mr. Nixon.

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. I'm just trying to understand why Mr. Malkinson wants to adjourn this motion to get a little more feedback on that so that we can understand, so that we can decide whether to support that or not. I mean, if Mr. Malkinson is too tired to participate, that's interesting, but I don't think that's enough to stop something as simple as trying to adjust a meeting time by 10 minutes and then, you know, delaying it for five or six months to make a decision. I think that, at first glance, it seems kind of silly.

The Chair: Mr. Malkinson.

Mr. Malkinson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. With this particular item, I mean, if the will of the committee is that they would really like to go to the shortened briefings and, you know, have that hard stop of 9:50, that's something I think we should discuss.

As far as switching over to doing the other thing, to having the briefings with the staff specifically, you know, my main thing that I've been saying, sort of my initial opposition, is that I like the current system. That's, I think, sort of where my position is on that. I'm happy to hear what the other committee members think about this. I like the current system, but I'm willing to be convinced.

The Chair: Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. Listen, you know, there are a lot of comments coming from a member that is not a member of the committee. He's certainly welcome to sit in and join in. That's absolutely fine. He wants to play games and talk about the fatigue, but fatigue is a real thing.

I actually appreciate the briefings. [interjection] Well, I don't really see what's funny and what you're giggling about. I actually appreciate the briefings. I particularly appreciate the briefings from research, and I think that if we're going to make a decision to really change the structure of our preparation, we need some time to think about that. I've actually not put a lot of thought into this, and I take it fairly seriously. It's not a joke. So I would actually agree with MLA Malkinson.

11:20

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fildebrandt, you had a question.

Mr. Fildebrandt: Mr. Chair, we're spending more time discussing this than the entire fall and winter agenda, I'd like to point out. Let's make a decision one way or another. Let's just put the question, and

if it's rejected, we can consider it again in the fall. Let's move on. We've got stuff to do.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Fildebrandt.
Ms Miller.

Ms Miller: Thank you, Chair. I just want to say that for some of the meetings the briefings are very detailed, more than others, because they're long briefings, and cutting it short to 15 minutes sometimes just won't cut it. So we have to decide whether we want to be able to ask questions on the briefings and of the Auditor General, or do we want to cut the meeting short?

The Chair: Thank you for that, Ms Miller.
Mrs. Littlewood.

Mrs. Littlewood: Thank you, Chair. I know that in a number of these briefings we've had the opportunity where the researchers have been able to give us context for the information that's within their summaries, and I've been able to ask where information has come from that has been provided in the briefings as well.

Thanks.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Mrs. Littlewood.
Well, right now we actually don't have a motion on the floor.

Mr. Fildebrandt: I move that.

The Chair: Okay. Mr. Fildebrandt moves the motion.

Just to clarify, the motion will be that Mr. Fildebrandt moves that the start and end times for the meetings of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts during the session be revised to 8:20 a.m. to 9:50 a.m.

Any further discussion on this motion?

Mr. Gotfried: Mr. Chair, I think that this is worth us giving it a try. There's nothing to stop us from reverting if we find that the time is too short for the briefing session. Again, there's nothing to say that the advanced briefing offered by the office of the Auditor General and the research team can't be actually longer than what we've had before and a day or two in advance, which I think just allows us to be that much better prepared, not less prepared. It allows us, actually, to come to the table with some additional questions for that shortened period, which can clarify. Those can be for clarity and allow us to move ahead in a more timely manner. I think, you know, we would all like to be in the House on time at 10 a.m. if we possibly can. With unanimous consent we can go to 9:59 if we need to.

I think it is worth a try for us to do it. There's nothing to say that we can't revisit this as a committee if we find that it's too compressed for us. My sense, again, is that at our briefing sessions we've been running out of questions, so I think we have to take that into account, the reality of what we've been experiencing, and say: let's give this a try. With the consent here I don't think anybody is saying that this is hard and fast and that there's no going back, but I think this is an opportunity for us to try something a little bit different. Most important, I think, is the prebriefing opportunity from OAG and the research team and to take this as an opportunity for us to be a better committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gotfried.

On the phones, do you have any comments that you would like to make regarding this motion?

Okay. Hearing none, we'll go to the question. All those for this motion? All those against? The motion has been defeated.

To move on, the next one would be the CCPAC-CCOLA 2017 joint conference. It's scheduled for September 10 to 12 in Fredericton, New Brunswick. In the past the conference has generally been attended by the PAC chair and the deputy chair as well as a committee research staff member and the committee clerk. The approved committee budget for 2017-18 accounts for this attendance of four individuals.

If the members are in agreement with this proposal, I would suggest the following motion. It is moved that

the Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the attendance of the chair, the deputy chair, the committee clerk, and a committee researcher at the 2017 CCPAC and CCOLA conference in Fredericton, New Brunswick, from September 10 to 12, 2017, and that selected members be identified as alternates at a later date in the event that the approved delegates are unable to attend.

That's quite the motion. Is anybody willing to move that motion? Mr. Malkinson. Any discussion? Member Loyola.

Loyola: Yeah. I was just hoping that it would be clear that if anybody additional wanted to go, it would be on their own accord. Just so there's an understanding of that.

The Chair: I believe that this was what was done in the past by the deputy chair.

Loyola: Just so that we have it on the record.

The Chair: There's no cost to the committee, so there should be no objection to that.

Mr. Fildebrandt: We've varied the practice a bit in previous years. It's varied a little bit. I think we've had a policy that if folks wanted to go who are not the chair, the deputy chair, or a member of the working group, effectively, we would pay the registration for them but not their hotels and their travels. I know that Mr. Dach went one year. I'm not sure if he paid for all of it. Another year he or someone else went. I won't be going, but if another member wanted to go on their own dime, paying their own travel and their own accommodations, I think it would be reasonable if we paid for their registration.

Mr. Dach: The first year that I sat on the committee, I did attend. My conference fee was paid. However, the subsequent year the policy was changed so that no compensation would be granted to anybody beyond those two, the chair and the deputy chair, and two staffers. That's where we're at right now, and I think that's where we should stay. If anybody wants to go on their own, they're totally on their own, without compensation from the government.

Mr. Gotfried: Deputy Chair, I think that if I recall correctly, you were at a family event or something in the city where it was taking place and were able to attend at your own expense. I would like to think that we'd want as many people as possible that could attend, particularly if they're willing to pay their own way. I guess my question to our clerk would be: maybe if we limit the number and say up to three additional or something, would we have it in our budget to cover the registration cost only of additional members?

The Chair: The committee clerk has put forward some concern that we may not actually have the room in our budget to be able to facilitate that. At this point I think that we can have further discussion on this if we'd like, but it sounds like we don't have the available funds to be able to make that a priority now.

Any further discussion on this motion?

Mr. Panda: Mr. Chair, can I jump in?

The Chair: You bet, Mr. Panda.

Mr. Panda: If someone wants to go and if the committee doesn't have the budget, can they get their constituency budget to pay for it? Is that an option?

The Chair: I believe, Mr. Panda, you would need to go to the LAO to discuss that and see if they would be willing to move that concern forward. I would recommend that you discuss it with FMAS.

Mr. Panda: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Now, have we got any further discussion? No?

All in favour? Any opposed? On the phones? The motion is carried. Thank you.

Members who wish to put their names forward as alternates for this conference should anyone be unable to attend can e-mail the committee clerk by the end of June. With respect to that, we will conduct a draw to determine rankings of alternates, depending on the number of names received.

Moving on to other business, are there any items under other business? Okay.

As approved, the committee meets next on Wednesday, September 6, 2017, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Would a member move to adjourn the meeting? Member Loyola. All in favour? Any opposed? On the phone? Okay. Carried.

Thank you very much.

[The committee adjourned at 11:30 a.m.]

