Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

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Day 93

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature
Second Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 7, 2021

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, please be seated.

Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole

[Mrs. Pitt in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, I would like to call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 54
Irrigation Districts Amendment Act, 2021

The Chair: Are there any members wishing to join debate? Seeing the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, good evening, Madam Chair. It is a pleasure to rise and offer a few comments about Bill 54, the Irrigation Districts Amendment Act, an act that, as I understand it, enables irrigation districts to procure loans for the purposes of investing in expanding their infrastructure. It is certainly something that our caucus thinks is worthy of support, and in general I am supportive of the intent of the bill as well as the details of the bill that are presented here tonight. I think one of the stated aims, of course, of this piece of legislation is to enhance the ability of farmers to do the good work that they've done for over a century in southern Alberta, and I'm glad to see that this piece of legislation will enable farmers to expand their ability to grow the agriculture sector in sectors of the province that are extremely water scarce and thereby increase agricultural productivity.

You know, the minister of agriculture has spent a lot of time in this Chamber talking about how much he supports agricultural workers in this sector, and I'm sure that when he brought forward this bill, it was his intent to do so in support of agricultural workers. It is a shame, Madam Chair, that that same minister, it turns out, knowingly hid information to keep the workers at Cargill safe. We had hundreds of people get sick and three people die in the largest outbreak of COVID in all of North America. He knew about it, and he hid that information from people, and three people are dead as a result of it. So it's a bit rich when the minister stands up and says that he is . . .

Mr. McIver: Point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Point of Order
Allegations against a Member

Mr. McIver: Standing Order 23(h), "makes allegations against another Member" and "imputes false or unavowed motives." That's exactly what we just heard. I would ask you, respectfully, to have the hon. member withdraw his remarks and carry on in a different manner.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's not a point of order. It's something that was reported with respect to government documents with respect to the Cargill outbreak. That's a matter of the public record. It's a matter of debate. It's not an allegation. It was something that was reported publicly. It's not a point of order.

The Chair: Hon. members, there are a number of issues which we could take with the member's words, one being that part of this matter is before the courts right now, so this may fall under sub judice and not be a topic which members of this Assembly should be discussing. The second matter is that I would caution the member and strongly advise him to apologize and withdraw as he was most certainly making unavowed motives towards another member in this Chamber.

Mr. Schmidt: Just for clarity, Madam Chair, are you requesting that I apologize and withdraw my comments?

The Chair: Yes, please.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Then I do so and wish to continue.

Debate Continued

Mr. Schmidt: It is quite clear that under any normal circumstance this kind of minister would have lost his job months and months ago, and this bill would have been presented by another minister of agriculture. But it is something indeed to see this government so unconcerned with the suffering and death of Albertans that they don't even have the moral courage to do the right thing, when somebody has knowingly committed this kind of act, and resign. The only words of comfort that I can offer to the families at Cargill is that that minister and the rest of the executive benches will be replaced after the next Alberta election with a much more caring and competent government, and I hope that that provides some glimmer of hope and comfort to families who are mourning the sickness and loss of loved ones.

Mr. Rutherford: Point of order.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont.

Point of Order
Relevance

Mr. Rutherford: Madam Chair, 23(b)(i), speaks to a matter that's not currently under discussion. I would just ask that he focus back on the bill that we have in front of us.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. Again, it's not a point of order. I think the member had just started talking, and in general the chair has provided a lot of latitude to the members when they are making their point. The member is talking about an agriculture bill, and I think it's fair to talk about the minister and how he has done on this file. It's not a point of order. I guess my colleague will take a more cautious approach going forward.

The Chair: I think that's a wise piece of advice for the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. I again will express caution around imputing false motives towards another member as a particular minister in this Chamber, also matters that are before the court. Let's just get back on topic and have a wonderful evening.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Debate Continued

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate your guidance, as always, on this matter. Of course, I would suggest to

all members of the Chamber that of all of the people who get up to speak, I am often the most cautious with my words, so I would encourage all members to follow my own example and temper their comments as carefully as I do.

You know, it's interesting, Madam Chair. I want to spend a moment to just talk about the significant impact that irrigation has had on the fortunes of the province of Alberta. As we all know, before Alberta was created as a province, the Palliser expedition was sent forth from eastern Canada to survey large portions of western Canada for its suitability for agriculture. What the Palliser expedition came back and reported was that there was this massive area of land, roughly in the shape of a triangle, that stretched from what is now central Manitoba all the way to the eastern slopes of the Rockies, from the Canadian-American border to the outskirts of Edmonton, practically, a triangle of area that, in his estimation, was not suitable for cultivated crops.

Now, you wouldn't know this, Madam Chair, if you were to have studied the draft curriculum that the government is proposing because, in fact, it states in its draft form that the Palliser expedition found that this triangle was suitable for agriculture, but nothing could be further from the truth. I worry deeply that our future students will learn a gross misrepresentation of the truth in social studies class should this draft curriculum see the light because what the Palliser expedition, as I said, determined was that the area in this triangle was not suitable for agriculture using normal means.

But the fact is, and you only have to give a passing glance out the window as you drive through southern Alberta to see, that the area is incredibly abundant, that through the ingenuity of Albertans we have turned what would not normally be a vibrant agricultural area into one of the most vibrant agricultural areas in the world. In fact, in the old days, I remember, you know, southern Alberta as well as southern Saskatchewan being described as the breadbasket of Canada. I don't know if we use that phrase anymore, but that's certainly one of the nicknames for the area that I learned when I was growing up, in a curriculum that would have been outdated if it had been compared to anything other than the draft curriculum that the government has brought forward.

7:40

One of the reasons that the agricultural productivity in southern Alberta is so high and so world-renowned is because of the significant investments that we have made over the past hundred or so years into the irrigation of that area. Only through irrigation would we have enough water to provide sufficient water for the crops that are grown in that part of the world.

I think, Madam Chair, it is incredibly important that we keep in mind how precious water is to the success of the agricultural industry. Now, the government has admitted as much when they bring forward this bill to enable the irrigation districts to make significant investments to expand the infrastructure that they have to make available to farmers. But it's interesting because when it comes to protecting water quality and water quantity, this government seems to be doing everything in its power to make sure that the irrigation districts don't have access to the volumes of clean water that are needed to make sure that our farmers can make a living and contribute to a successful agricultural sector.

There are a number of concerning issues facing the farmers and ranchers of southern Alberta right now with respect to both water quality and water quantity, Madam Chair. I don't know if members have been paying attention to the news over the past year, but this government has decided to open up vast tracts of the headwaters that feed these irrigation districts to coal mining. It's well documented, the impact that coal mining will have on water quality in these watersheds.

It was – what? – a week ago that one of the biggest mining companies in the world was fined $60 million for contaminating a B.C. watershed with calcite and selenium, with the by-products of their mines. That $60 million fine was the largest fine ever levied under the federal Fisheries Act. What people need to keep in mind, Madam Chair, is not just the value of the fine that was levied against this coal company; it's also the value of water that was lost because of the activities of this coal company. That $60 million likely doesn't even come close to capturing the lost value of the water in that B.C. watershed because it's been contaminated irreparably for generations with the by-products of those coal-mining activities. Scientists have spent a lot of time and a lot of money trying to figure out how to reverse the impact of selenium pollution that's caused by coal mines, and they can't do it. There is no known way of reversing selenium contamination from coal mining once it's been created. The people in Elk Valley in B.C. know that well enough. That $60 million fine doesn't even scratch the surface when it comes to repairing the damage that has been done to that.

Now, Madam Chair, all you have to do is transplant that same coal mine onto the other side of the continental divide and just imagine the impact that that would have here. Imagine if every rancher along the Oldman River who drew his water from the Oldman River and the South Saskatchewan River had to figure out a way to decontaminate that water of selenium before he could spread it on his crops. It can't be done. How much damage would that cause every rancher in those watersheds, and how much more would the irrigation districts have to invest just to repair the damage that this government seeks to do with its misguided coal policies? I don't know, Madam Chair. I suspect that if this legislation were to be put in place and irrigation districts would have to take out loans to repair that damage, the loans would be so high that they would never be able to pay them off.

So I hope that the government rethinks what it's doing to the agricultural sector in this province and follows up on the good work that is being done with this bill in supporting our agricultural industry and steps away from its misguided intentions to mine coal in vast swaths of the eastern slopes, because all of the good work that's being done with this bill will be quickly undone once the shovels are in the ground. Then what will we have? How could the government justify investing hundreds of millions of dollars into an irrigation system that, at the end of the day, doesn't work, just spreads contaminated, polluted water on all of the crops in southern Alberta? I sincerely hope that as the government passes this legislation, as I expect it will, it gives serious thought to the other things that it can do to make sure that our agricultural producers are successful and that they have the clean water that they can rely on.

But it's not just water quality that's at issue right now in southern Alberta. It's also water quantity, Madam Chair. Now, we all know that irrigation districts are the largest users of water in the entire province. There is more water allocated to irrigation districts than there is to any other water user in all of Alberta, so any threat to their water quantity is a threat to the very success of the agricultural industry. They need a lot of water to make their producers successful, and as I said, Alberta is an incredibly water-short jurisdiction.

It's extremely concerning to me that the minister of environment sees fit to monkey around with the allocation order concerning allocations of water in the Oldman River basin. You know, we've heard time and again that, oh, I'm just telling tales out of school, Madam Chair. Every time I raise this issue, the minister of environment is quick to tell me that, no, he's never considered such a thing in his life but that if he did, it's only because he's concerned about preserving the fish in the Oldman River basin. It's incredibly strange that in one breath I'm making up this tale of water

reallocation from whole cloth, and then in the very next breath he's justifying what he's trying to do by saying that the fish in the river need that water. One of those statements can't be true, and I sincerely hope that the minister of environment will come forward and let us know which one of those statements is actually true.

Moreover, if he were genuinely concerned about just providing enough water to make sure that the fish have healthy habitats, he could do that without making any other changes to the allocation order, but that's not what his ministry has contemplated. His ministry was on a road show through November and December floating potential changes to the Oldman River basin water allocation order that would give millions and millions of litres of water for vague industrial purposes.

7:50

He won't go so far as to say that it's for coal mines. Lord knows what other industries might pop up down there. I don't know. Maybe he's planning to build a bunch of accordion factories, and they need a bunch of water. Honestly, if you were planning to build accordion factories, my heart would sing with joy because that's much more economic development and diversification than this government actually has on offer for the people of Alberta right now. No, the only proposed industrial activities in the Oldman River basin right now that could possibly benefit from a reallocation of water . . .

The Chair: Are there any other members wishing to join debate on Bill 54? The hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Glasgo: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just wanted to be able to speak in Committee of the Whole as I spoke in second reading yesterday. Bill 54 is a huge deal in my riding. It represents a massive commitment from our government to invest in agriculture and invest, actually, in our economic recovery and in diversification. The Irrigation Districts Amendment Act, 2021, is a piece of legislation, as we know, that empowers the irrigation districts to be able to borrow. It clarifies the language around commercial activity in the act, which means that the risk that irrigation districts are taking in connection with the $815 million deal that – it basically evades all the issues that could be taken into a court if that were to be the case.

I know that irrigation districts have fought long and hard to be recognized as the economic powerhouses that they are, and I'm glad to say that our government has invested in that. Of course, there is a significant investment from the Canadian Infrastructure Bank. That being said, that makes this legislation even more timely, Madam Chair. It shows that this legislation is needed. It shows that this legislation is pretty straightforward. I'm actually really glad to see that this is a point of unity in this Chamber, that we can all agree that our agriculture sector is worth defending and worth investing in. I know that I have a private member's motion coming up that actually talks about the agriculture industry and its centrality to our success and future in this province.

As the MLA for Brooks-Medicine Hat I represent one of the largest irrigation districts in the province, the Eastern irrigation district. The Eastern irrigation district is a huge landowner. It's a job provider. It's a powerhouse, really, Madam Chair. Without the EID and without the investments made by the EID, there would be many farmers and landowners who wouldn't have access to water. As we know and as the previous member was talking about and as I talked about yesterday, which can be found in the thrilling book *Tapping the Bow*, if anybody is interested – it is the history of irrigation in Alberta. In that book it teaches us that there was arid land in Alberta. There was nobody who could farm it. You know, we knew that we needed to get water to these areas, and without the innovation in agriculture via irrigation this wouldn't even be possible.

So I am glad to see that everybody in here is supporting this legislation as I think it's very, very important, and it shows unity in our economic relaunch and in our path forward for Albertans and especially for rural Alberta, who need this hope now more than ever.

Madam Chair, I know that we talk about a lot of things. We do talk about agriculture quite often in the House, but I don't think we ever talk about it as much as we possibly should. Throughout the pandemic agriculture was there when other industries couldn't be. Our farmers and ranchers never stopped. They never stopped working. They couldn't stop working, whether they were, you know, feeding livestock or growing the crops that we eat. We are the breadbasket of the country, and we need to be able to continue to do that good work.

I was very pleased to join the minister of agriculture as well as the Premier and the minister of environment as well as other MLAs and our irrigation districts that we represent in Calgary at the Big Four when this announcement was being made. It was a real good-news story, Madam Chair. It brought so many people from across the province together to talk about just how much work our irrigators do and how valued they really are. Like I said, I'm just very glad to see that.

We know that water is a very precious resource. The Minister of Municipal Affairs and of Transportation once told me that whisky is for drinking and water is for fighting, and that rings true. We know that water is a finite resource, and we need to be able to manage that resource effectively.

When we're talking about water, we also need to talk about ways to store water and use it more efficiently. We know that the South Saskatchewan River basin is maxed out on water allocation, which means that there will be no more water allocation given from the South Saskatchewan River basin. That impacts farmers and ranchers across the province. Then the question becomes: how do we grow more with the same resource? How do we do more with less?

How we do that, Madam Chair, is by investing in infrastructure like pipelines. Converting open culverts to pipelines will allow these irrigators to be able to do more with the same amount of water allocation, therefore decreasing their environmental impact, decreasing the amount of water that they're using from the river, and being able to feed more people, which I think is a really, really wonderful thing. Overall, I love talking about this because I think that it's a great opportunity for me to (a) speak about how wonderful the Eastern irrigation district is and how wonderful my constituency is and (b) talk about water, which is something that – I don't how many people get excited about it, but it gets me going.

I know that there are conversations around coal in the Chamber, of course. We know that we have to have a balanced approach when it comes to developing our resources, whether that's water or the natural resources that are in the ground. The Eastern irrigation district as well as other irrigation districts are pleased to see that our government has continued in consultation with them. In fact, I have members from the Eastern irrigation district meeting with the minister of agriculture tomorrow. He heard their concerns through me, and he's willing to make sure that they are heard. I'm just very happy to see that our ministers remain open to public feedback and to the people in Brooks-Medicine Hat, who deserve to be heard.

You know, we have an opportunity, I think, every day in this House to stand up for something that matters, and one of the things that really matters is our future. There was a historic investment made in irrigation infrastructure earlier this year, and that irrigation

investment will increase our irrigable lands by over 200,000 acres and create 8,000 jobs. That's 8,000 Albertans who will see a direct benefit from this as well as the millions of people around the world who will be able to eat and have nutritious food and benefit from Alberta's irrigation districts as well as our agriculture sector.

I just wanted to add my support for this bill, again, in Committee of the Whole as I do think it's one of the most important pieces of legislation that's gone through the House for Brooks-Medicine Hat as we are major irrigators and rely on this very much both in Cypress county, which is irrigated by the St. Mary River irrigation district in the northern half, where I represent, and the Eastern irrigation district, which irrigates the county of Newell.

Thank you, Madam Chair, for the opportunity to add my voice to the debate today. I am very glad to see that all members of the House are in support of our agriculture sector, and I'm excited to see what the debate will look like on my private member's motion, when we're talking about agriculture again.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Any other members wishing to join debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to add some thoughts here this evening for the first time on Bill 54, the Irrigation Districts Amendment Act, 2021. I guess, if I can be so bold, I don't think I'd be going too far out on a limb when I think all members of this House are very supportive, including myself, of just how important irrigation is to the agriculture sector. It's necessary, it has to happen, and as a province we need to be continually investing in that. My hope is, of course, that the government will continue to do that.

You know, with Bill 54, what we're seeing here is the ability for the government, in partnership with the federal government, to invest in that industry. We're talking about over three-quarters of a billion dollars here. I think it was somewhere in the neighbourhood of $815 million, with $541 million of that coming from the federal government.

8:00

Now, I have to say, Madam Chair, you know, recently when I've seen this kind of partnership between the province and the federal government, it seems the province has had, shall we say, difficulties getting money, that the federal government is providing, out the door. So, you know, based on those examples, I can't help but wonder: will we continue to see the same sort of problems after this bill is potentially passed? Of course, I would never presuppose the decision of the House, but my spidey sense says that it'll likely be passing with support.

There are a couple of things, actually, that I've noticed that this bill doesn't address, and I really wish they were part of it. You know, I'm wondering: was it the government rushing a little bit to try to get some kind of good news out the door because they certainly haven't had very much of that in terms of their legislation?

I've always said that I always get hung up on the things that have been said, the legislation that has come forward. I know that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was talking about how this bill is meant to support agriculture workers, which I am wholeheartedly for, yet I've seen legislation come forward in this House that potentially puts workers at risk in their workplace by reducing safety legislation, reducing their ability to participate to make their work sites safe. You know, we've seen changes that have made agriculture workers themselves at greater risk.

So when you see legislation like this coming forward, Madam Chair, like Bill 54, being touted as supporting workers, yet what you've done before hasn't supported them, I can't, again, help but question, you know: will you get the money out the door that the federal government is providing for this, and will you actually support the workers? What I've seen thus far doesn't necessarily do that.

The other part that I've noticed in terms of concerns that this thing doesn't address is some of the drainage infrastructure in the north part of the province. Why was that left out? Was it that you didn't get to it, or, you know, maybe we'll do that later? What's the case? I mean, you had a great opportunity here to support northern Alberta in terms of that. Perhaps through more discussion here in Committee of the Whole maybe we'll see some answers around that. At least if there is something coming, then folks in northern Alberta will be given some heads up about that.

With the amount of money that we're talking about being invested, again going back to my friend from Edmonton-Gold Bar talking about the decisions around coal mining and the negative effects, I remember reading that same story that he referenced, and I was shocked, quite honestly, by the discoveries that were made. I mean, yeah, absolutely, everybody says, you know, humans need a little bit of selenium in their system in very, very small quantities, but the measurements that were getting taken a considerable distance from that mine site, those readings were well beyond what a human can tolerate, not to mention what they tested at right at the mine itself.

So if we're talking about investing money in irrigation, like Bill 54 is going to be able to do, are we going to undo all of that, potentially, by allowing coal mining in these areas? It seems, again, counterproductive to what you're trying to accomplish. On one hand you're saying that we're going to support workers and this is going to be great, but then over here we're going to undo it all and potentially wreck it, and all of that investment will be wasted, not to mention that if we start to get people sick, the amount that's going to cost the health care system. If we continue to have problems dealing with the pandemic that we're in right now, Madam Chair, then how are we going to get things under control if we're going to add those problems on top of that as well?

When I heard the previous member speak about, you know, the meetings that were going to take place with the agriculture minister, I'm crossing my fingers; I hope those meetings go very, very well. I hope that the minister listens. The comment was: very open to public feedback. But, you know, I feel like I'm picking on my friend here from Edmonton-Gold Bar, when you mentioned about what happened at Cargill. There was very clear feedback given there. When you see an instance like that and then here we have something where we're going to have a meeting about irrigation tomorrow, will those comments actually be genuinely taken, or will it just be somebody quickly jotting down some notes? "Great. Have a nice day. We're going to do what we want anyway." I hope those conversations go well tomorrow. I'll keep my fingers crossed on that.

I'd just hate to see this kind of investment, which will help to ensure that the irrigation of this province is kept up, made better, get undone by everything else that's going on. I'm curious. How are you planning to ensure that when all this money is invested, that water won't be contaminated? I'm hoping we will get some answers to that. Committee of the Whole is the place to do it. We can have that discussion. I mean, the feedback that we've heard on this has been ridiculous.

You know, I am curious with regard to one piece of Bill 54, why only eight of the 13 irrigation canals are registered for the program. Why not the others? Again, I'm finding myself going back and thinking: well, this government doesn't pick winners and losers. I've heard that over and over again. Yet when we see things like

child care, we've clearly seen winners and losers chosen there. And here we have only eight of the 13 districts. Are you picking winners and losers? I'm curious to hear a little bit about that. I'm hoping there will be some information provided towards that.

My hope is that as we move forward on this bill – as I said, I do think this is a good bill. I don't want to see the good work that this bill potentially can make happen be completely undone by allowing things like coal mining to be done in the areas that will significantly impact these waters, which will significantly impact the sector that needs this water, which ultimately ends up on all of our dinner plates, including all of our constituents' dinner plates, and we end up creating a bigger problem.

I'm looking forward to more discussion on this, Madam Chair. Hopefully, we'll see some of these questions answered. You know, maybe, perhaps I might have further comments later on, but I appreciate the opportunity to add some at this time.

The Chair: Are there any other members wishing to join debate on Bill 54 in Committee of the Whole? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm pleased to rise to provide my comments and my perspective on Bill 54 with respect to how irrigation districts might reorganize some of their quasi-commercial arrangements such that they may borrow money.

8:10

This bill is legislation that enables the irrigation districts to undertake an agreement with the Canada Infrastructure Bank, and the reasonably sizable investment – quite sizable; $815 million in all – is a 20 per cent investment by eight IDs, a 30 per cent grant from the government of Alberta, and 50 per cent financed by the Canada Infrastructure Bank, repaid by the irrigation districts. This is, in fact, a bill that is a requirement to be able to take more federal money, essentially. It's a good investment. They should do it. They absolutely should. That's what we are here to do today, and it's a good thing that this is moving forward under the Canada Infrastructure Bank.

There is no question that the Conservative Party of Canada has pledged to scrap the Canada Infrastructure Bank. We'll see if now an $815 million investment, contingent upon the CIB's $35 billion in federal funding to attract private-sector investment and the $10 billion growth plan – we will see if, you know, a tenth, essentially, of that $10 billion growth plan is put at risk by the Conservative Party of Canada and their election platform coming up here. Having said that, right now we have what looks to me like a very wise investment by the government of Alberta, partnering with the government of Canada and Ottawa and the irrigation districts, to make wise and forward-looking and long-term investments in southern Alberta.

Now, irrigation districts play an incredible part in the community that I represent in Lethbridge. In fact, one of my neighbours just down the road has just retired as a senior administrator in, I believe, the St. Mary River irrigation district. He is now retired, and I visit with him when he is riding his bike past my house, undertaking a much more leisurely pace than my lifestyle of running children everywhere. He's having a wonderful retirement, and he stopped by the other day to talk about how, you know, coal in the eastern slopes really does put at risk the existing infrastructure and any investments in future infrastructure.

There is no way around this, that when selenium and other contaminants get into our irrigation infrastructure, it puts the efficiency of the entire system at risk, it puts the costs of remediating any of those contaminants within the system at risk, and it, I would imagine, I guess, decreases the risk-adjusted returns for agricultural producers, and it also may have an impact on future investments, large investments such as that of the Cavendish foods factory in north Lethbridge in the industrial park, which is a potato-processing facility, and potatoes are an irrigated crop, Madam Chair. So these are extremely important issues in the city of Lethbridge and to anyone who has an attachment to irrigation, which, as my hon. colleagues have explained, really has built much of the economy in southern Alberta.

People are also very attached to the agricultural industry and also wondering about this government's priorities not just in terms of putting their water at risk and the types of crops that they might be able to grow and their productivity and their yields but also due to the now some 250 layoffs in Alberta Agriculture and in agriculture research. One has to expect that a massive investment in irrigation districts is also helped along by understanding how crop productivity can be enhanced by using lower water volumes, different kinds of water, watering times, other things that the agriculture research that was being performed out of those Alberta Agriculture offices in southern Alberta but no longer are – 250 people have lost their jobs – that these investments would be enhanced by the presence of those dedicated Albertans, dedicated, again, to the long haul of economic development and prosperity in this province.

Now, the executive director of Farming Smarter, Ken Coles, who has a number of different research endeavours out of Lethbridge College, was quoted in Global News recently – it was March 1, in fact – indicating that the cuts, when they were first implemented, were quite drastic.

> And it was literally sort of ending the Alberta government's role in research and an extension and so that meant a lot of lay offs . . . When you cut research, often the impacts aren't going to be felt until a few years down the road, so we're just starting to see some of the impacts now.

Again, agriculture is an industry that is in it for the long haul. We know that it is an industry that partners with Albertans for our shared prosperity, but it also is looking towards the future. Now, in fact, this particular investment is going to apparently go quite a long way to increasing our number of irrigated acres by 200,000 without increasing our water allocations. Those are just the kinds of clean technology and other infrastructure upgrades that they are going to be making based on research and development and other investments that come from these investments made jointly, 50 per cent by Ottawa and 50 per cent cost shared by the irrigation districts themselves and the government of Alberta, understanding that that initial $400 million from the Canada Infrastructure Bank will also be paid back over time by the irrigation districts themselves.

Now, if a goal of increasing your irrigated acres by 200,000 without increasing your allocations is not an indication of, one, being in it for the long haul and, two, also being dedicated to innovation, then I don't know what is. Compare and contrast strip-mining coal in the eastern slopes, that is expected to last for 10 to 12 years at best and deliver almost nothing, a pittance, with respect to royalties. Compare that to the great gifts that irrigation and agriculture have given to us in southern Alberta and, in fact, given to the world, because we do not just export Canadian hard spring wheat, in the old formulation of southern Alberta being a breadbasket. No. We are also massive exporters of lentils, peas, other pea proteins, and other pulse crops. The fact of the matter is that there are large parts of Southeast Asia, for example, the Indian subcontinent – some of their daily diet comes from that highway 3 corridor in southern Alberta – billions of people who rely on us to get it right in agriculture.

They are doing this in water-stressed regions, responding to the reality of climate change, adding productivity and yields and – notice – increasing their irrigated acres without increasing their water allocations. It's a good thing because of all those billions of litres that were just taken upstream of Oldman dam. The consultations were done to turn those allocations that were held back in the first instance, when the dam was built, such that perhaps there would be an expansion above the dam of irrigation, of irrigated crops. But those volumes were held back, and now – and now – we learn via a PowerPoint presentation that possibly those are volumes that are going to be signed over to industrial use and not to support the folks that we are here to support tonight with the eventual passage of this bill.

In sum, to provide my comments at this Committee of the Whole stage, I am pleased that we will be moving forward with this considerable investment in southern Alberta, in our economy, in our water, in our agricultural sector, in clean technology, in research and development. I'm pleased that we are doing that despite the massive numbers of layoffs, 250 in Alberta Agriculture, despite the cuts at Lethbridge College and in some of the programs at the University of Lethbridge that also support these endeavours, despite putting the entire system at risk by poisoning our headwaters. Despite all of that, our agriculture sector will be supported by this legislation and will in fact contribute to the long-term safety, security, food security of our province, across the country, and indeed around the world.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

8:20

The Chair: Any members wishing to join debate on Bill 54 in Committee of the Whole? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll keep my comments brief because I know that my colleagues are eager to move on with the agenda for this evening, but I just was reminded by some of the comments from my friend from Lethbridge-West around agricultural research. The tremendous investment that we're making to support the irrigation districts is dependent upon a number of investments, as she quite well highlighted: investments in clean, adequate supplies of water, investments in agricultural research and innovation. Those are also investments that are needed to make our agricultural sector successful. I want to highlight a couple of investments or disinvestments that the government has made in addition to the massive layoffs in the department of agriculture, and that is the massive cuts to the University of Alberta in particular. The University of Alberta has one of the foremost agriculture faculties in the entire world. In fact, Alberta agriculture is successful largely because of the work that has been done for over 100 years at the University of Alberta faculty of agriculture.

There is a significant threat facing the work that the faculty of agriculture does right now, and that is with respect to a parcel of land known as the west 240. Now, my colleague from Edmonton-Riverview is well acquainted with that land as it resides in her constituency, but it is one of the foremost research plots for agricultural crops in the entire country. This plot of land is under threat by the university that owns it, oddly enough, because the university has it in its head that it wants to become a real estate developer, and it looks at this land in the west 240, and it says: "You know what would be better here than one of the world-leading agricultural plots of land? Condos." They lobbied me heavily, Madam Chair, when I was Minister of Advanced Education, and I'm sure that they're lobbying the current Minister of Advanced Education as we speak to allow them to divest themselves of that plot of land and turn it into condos.

Madam Chair, the dean of agriculture, all of the faculty of agriculture could not have made their case more strongly to me that the west 240 at the University of Alberta needs to be protected for future generations of agricultural researchers, so I certainly hope that the Minister of Advanced Education and his colleagues in Executive Council do not give in to the lobbying that's going on from the University of Alberta to turn that over to the land trust and turn that land into condominiums. That would put the future prosperity of our agricultural sector at risk.

Despite what the university executives say, you cannot replace that research overnight. They continue to claim that just north of St. Albert they've got the university farm, that that could be turned into a successful research station. Nothing could be further from the truth, Madam Chair. The soils are completely different. The climate is significantly different enough that all of the research that is done there cannot be meaningfully translated to the university farm north of St. Albert.

If this government is serious about investing in the success of the agricultural industry, as it says it does, not only does it need to make sure that we have clean, adequate supplies of water, not only does it need to make sure that we have a well-funded, well-resourced department of agriculture; we also need to have successful faculties of agriculture at our universities, including the University of Alberta. That includes keeping the west 240 under the purview of the faculty of agriculture and not turning it over to the real estate developers who want to turn it into condos.

Thank you.

The Chair: Hon. members, we are on Bill 54 in Committee of the Whole. Any other members wishing to join debate?

Seeing none, I will call the question.

[The clauses of Bill 54 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Any opposed? Carried.

The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Madam Chair. I move that the committee rise and report progress on Bill 54.

The Chair: It's just "report."

Mr. Madu: Sorry. Report Bill 54.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Ms Glasgo: Madam Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 54.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report? All those in favour, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Any opposed, please say no. So carried.

Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading

Bill 56
Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021

Ms Ganley moved that the motion for second reading of Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, be amended by deleting all the words after "that" and substituting the following:

> Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship in accordance with order 74.2.

[Debate adjourned on the amendment April 7: Ms Gray speaking]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, we are on amendment REF1. Are there members wishing to join debate on the amendment? The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to the amendment on Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. You know, I just wanted to do a little high level, first of all, before I get into some of the details, I think, just so we're clear about what the main things are that Bill 56 does.

The first thing that Bill 56 does: it extends the municipal sustainability initiative and delays the implementation of the replacement program, which we know would have been the local government fiscal framework. You know, I think that that is really significant because it is one more thing that this particular government has kicked down the road. It is having significant negative impacts on municipalities now, and it will into the future.

The second thing it does is that it legislates the cuts to the MSI program, which you can plainly see in the bill. You know, we've heard the UCP argue that although there's a cut, they're indeed front-loading some cash to ease some of the current burden on municipalities, which is true. The problem is what follows after that. It is one thing to say: well, it's all good right now. The problem is that one year – one year – without significant pressures is fine, but that's not how you build and grow and sustain communities.

The third thing, obviously, that we are concerned about is the funding update to the 911 system. Now, we understand that that is federally mandated. However, what this particular government is choosing to do, just like they continue to do in so many other areas, is sort of turn their back and pass on these costs to individual Albertans, just like they continue to pass on costs to municipalities.

You know, it would probably be okay, Madam Speaker, if you looked at one of the downloaded costs and think: well, this is it; things are difficult right now; perhaps municipalities can look at this and look at ways to manage these really deep cuts. But that's not it. It has just been this never-ending stream of downloading costs and pressures, not just costs but pressures, because of changes and cuts that are being made elsewhere. We are continuing to add these pressures to communities that are already struggling. Throw in a pandemic and all of the things that are associated with that, and it is just unmanageable right now.

I represent the city of St. Albert, so I'm going to speak to some of the impacts that this particular piece of legislation will have on just one community in Alberta. One of the things: obviously, we know that MSI was extended for another three years, but why did that happen? There was a failure of this government to implement a replacement program that had some really positive beneficial features to it, and that was about legislated predictability. I think for any of us that have been in this place for any length of time, you know, even before the last election, we've all heard this from our municipal leaders, from constituents, from every level saying: what we need is predictability; we need predictability, we need transparency, and we need honesty. Well, we're not getting much of that from this particular government or this piece of legislation, to be honest.

8:30

What this means for St. Albert is that certainly there will be a bump in the MSI funding for this year, obviously; $18 million is the portion that the city of St. Albert will receive. Now, that's great. That will address some of the huge pressures that exist in that municipality. But then it immediately drops to $4.6 million the next year. It goes from $18 million to $4.6 million. That is beyond bare bones for a city the size of St. Albert. This barely covers the cost of road maintenance, of all of the regular maintenance and upgrades that cities require every single year. This doesn't address any of the infrastructure that would actually grow the city or grow their ability to diversify their tax base even. As you know, the city of St. Albert is heavily reliant on the residential taxes as opposed to corporate taxes, and there is a very deliberate effort under way to change that up a little bit. But this kind of investment doesn't allow that long-term growth and planning to take place.

The other thing that it does is it causes stress in so many other areas because the city has to cover the gaps that the UCP, this government, has created. One of those issues for the city of St. Albert in particular is around affordable housing. The UCP has failed to invest in that part of Alberta, in affordable housing. That has huge pressure. I mean, because of the location of the city of St. Albert we often hear from different leaders, "Well, you know, you're close enough to Edmonton; don't worry about it and use their supports" when they're referring to, let's say, homeless supports or shelters or shelters for women leaving violent situations. But that's not sufficient. The city of Edmonton is already facing enormous pressure, so you see how this just sort of steamrolls. It just goes on and on and it gets worse and worse, and everything that is downloaded in terms of cuts, in terms of pressure decreases the quality of life for Albertans.

You know, one of the things that we talked about earlier this week, that I think relates to this piece of legislation because it goes along the same theme of downloading more and more costs to municipalities, is around policing. We talked about that in Public Accounts on Tuesday morning, and we were able to ask officials some different questions, trying to get more information. The point remains that this is another huge area where costs have been downloaded to municipalities.

For a city like St. Albert it's a little different than a community of under 5,000 people, the way that policing is covered. I guess the costs are covered. What this government is doing is actually taking a larger portion of fine revenue, going from I think it was 25 per cent to 40 per cent. Now, that might not sound significant, but it is. These are millions of dollars in fine revenue that the city of St. Albert relied on to pay for things like enforcement, like public education. All of these things – all of these things – were paid for. But once again, because they're just chipping away at how they support municipalities and other communities around Alberta, there's increased pressure.

It's not just the city of St. Albert, Madam Speaker. You know, not too far from St. Albert is, for example, Lac Ste. Anne county . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, I'll just remind you we're on the referral amendment.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. Okay. Going back to the referral amendment, why I think that we need to refer this and explore further are some

of the reasons that I'm outlining. It's really important that we listen to these municipal leaders. I think they've been very clear. They've been on the record, going back to 2019, talking about the dangerous path that we're on and giving examples of that. What this piece of legislation does is it just adds to that.

Madam Speaker, you know, I think that we can all agree, at least on this side, anyway, that what this piece of legislation very clearly does is it makes life more unaffordable and more difficult for Albertans. It will lead in many cases to increased property taxes, and then you will have some communities, municipalities really struggle with not doing that to their citizens, that for whatever reasons they're just unable to sustain any more increases at all, it doesn't fit with the direction that a particular council or mayor or reeve has endorsed. But what that means, ultimately, is that the people that live there end up paying for it. They pay for it either – if they increase their taxes, they pay for it, but if they don't, they pay for it with the loss of service, whether that's a loss of a community service, whether that's a loss of housing supports. Whatever it is, it is a loss, and ultimately it is Albertans that will pay for it.

You know, I just can't say it enough. It is just this pattern of downloading costs but not just that. It's just this – I describe it like a shell game, those old-fashioned carnival games where you put something under the shell, and then you move it around and try to figure out where it is. That's what this is like, and I find it so strange that often, Madam Speaker, we'll hear these different bills as they're trotted out by people, and they're standing up and talking about them, and it's, like, "This is a historic investment in policing; $286 million" or whatever it was, when really it was shifting, right? It was shifting the cost. Who's going to pay for it? Well, we're going to make municipalities or communities under 5,000 people: they're going to start paying. We're going to be removing or taking more fine revenue from other municipalities. So it's this massive shell game, and what this piece of legislation does: it just underlines the fact that this is the continued direction that we're on.

Madam Speaker, I am incredibly disappointed but absolutely not surprised that we're seeing legislation that will do the things that I think communities all around Alberta feared would happen. I think that they feared and understood that there were cuts coming, there were likely cuts coming. I don't believe that they anticipated or expected them to be this enormous or for the costs to be this large for them to bear. With that, I am going to end my comments on Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I did want to ask because the Member for St. Albert was talking about how Bill 56 is going to impact her constituents specifically in St. Albert. Of course, I know about the member's extensive history within the disability community, the challenges that they face day in and day out with just trying to eke out an existence, let alone trying to chase after their hopes and dreams, so I'm wondering if she might want to comment a little bit, because certainly folks in the disability community that live in St. Albert also live in Edmonton-Decore. I'm wondering what kind of challenges Bill 56 could pose not only for her constituents but the constituents of Edmonton-Decore as well.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you for the question. Absolutely, just like any other Albertan, an Albertan with a disability, very often on a very limited income, you know, feels these increases in a way that probably most of us in this place can't understand. When we talk about something like increasing the cost for a 911 system and passing that on to consumers, so passing that on to people that have cellphones and that have these contracts – and it might not sound like much. It might only sound like a few cents, and that might not seem like a hardship for many people, but I can tell you that for many thousands of people it's the difference between buying a few extra groceries or not.

8:40

And it has been – it's just another example of this chipping away at the resources that people have to work with. Most people do not have an ever-expanding source of revenue, right? They have set budgets. They hope their expenses stay the same. They try to cut corners. They try to save money. They try to put money away for their kids' education or for whatever reason. But this government keeps contributing to this chipping away.

In the case of people with disabilities not all people with disabilities live in poverty, thankfully, but sadly the vast majority do. When you see things like this happening, like, "Okay, well, it's going to cost a little bit more now for a phone, or you might pay a little bit more in property taxes if you're a homeowner," add to that the fact that people who are, let's say, AISH recipients or income support recipients for the last two years have lost ground because this government chose to deindex AISH. They say that it's not a cut, that it's just a deindex, but it's a cut. They have lost the cost-of-living increase for two consecutive years, pushing them further under the poverty line. What this piece of legislation does is: hey, that's great; we're going to add a little bit more pressure to Albertans.

Madam Speaker, you know, it's unfortunate that often in this place I'll hear government members stand up and talk about how supportive they are of different communities, their own communities, and people that live in poverty, and they just want what's best, yet they fail to see the big picture. They are cutting their sources of income, and they're increasing their expenses again and again and again and again and again, and they fail to take responsibility for that. Instead, they stand up and make these announcements, "It's a historic investment," when, really, it's a shell game. It's a shell game, and Albertans are the ones that pay the price.

With that, I'll take my seat. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members under Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, any other members wishing to speak to the referral amendment? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. Appreciate the opportunity this evening to add some first-time comments around Bill 56, the Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, and, of course, more specifically, the referral amendment that's before us. Without reading the entire thing, it just essentially says that the bill should be referred to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship. I think one of the main reasons this Assembly should send it to committee – because it seems like maybe we should be calling this bill something along the lines of We're Not Done Shortchanging Municipalities Yet. That's certainly what Bill 56 as a whole does.

[Ms Glasgo in the chair]

You know, I don't think municipalities were consulted on this. We have seen it time and time again: moves by the government to

make life more difficult for municipalities, which in turn makes life more difficult for Albertans that live in those communities. I don't know if we've seen Alberta as worse off as it is right now under this UCP government.

When I think back to when I had the opportunity and honour to serve in the 29th Legislature, I remember members that sit now on the government benches, I remember members that sit in the government caucus saying, "This bill has to go to committee" time and time and time and time again. So here we are yet again asking that perhaps we should put the brakes on for a moment and refer this to a committee. If you actually believe that that's true, that a bill should go through committee like this and get proper feedback, whatever it takes, and then bring that back to the Assembly with potential recommendations on either adding things, subtracting things, changing things a little bit, I have to say that the track record that I've seen thus far is that, well, all of a sudden, conveniently, the government is not so much interested in seeing bills go to committee. Again I just have to question: did they actually believe that in the first place, or are they what they seem to like to accuse us all the time of, just opposing for the sake of opposing? I'm wondering if maybe that was what was really going on.

Why would you do something – and I know the Member for St. Albert had touched on this a little bit, around 911. I'm curious: where in the three hundred and whatever trillion, zillion-page platform you guys had does it say that we're going to force municipalities to pay $41 million in upgrades and increase people's bills to pay for it? I want to know what page that's on. I kind of don't remember hearing about that. Yet I've heard about all the times we supposedly didn't campaign on that increase.

You know, it's curious. When I looked at this, a family of four with cellphones will pay an additional $25 a year because of this change. I realize that, yeah, $25 a year is probably not that much, really, for a family of four. Yet when we start to take in all of the different increases that have occurred under this UCP government over the course of time – we've seen the deindexing that went on around personal income taxes, including deindexing of AISH recipients, for instance, and the pressures that that ends up creating.

We've seen people's electricity bills go up. We've seen their gas bills go up. We've seen their insurance bills go up. We'll be seeing their property taxes go up, school fees increasing. Out of that family of four, I bet you that maybe there are a couple that might be heading to postsecondary institutions, which have seen significant cuts in that department. Their tuition is going up. Oh, and hang on, we're not done yet. On the loans that you're going to take out, we're going to see interest rates increase. I'm wondering what page all of that was on in that big platform commitment.

An Hon. Member: Somewhere towards the back.

Mr. Nielsen: Probably somewhere in the really, really, really tiny print that you need a high-powered microscope to read.

This is why the bill has to go to committee and why REF1 is so important. Here's your opportunity, perhaps finally, to make good on what I used to always hear about why bills need to go to committee. Here's your chance. Do you actually believe that? Currently, right now, the way Bill 56 is in this form, it's terrible.

I don't believe municipalities said, "Absolutely, I want to be on the hook for $41 million; please, how fast can we get there?" and all the other changes. You're already interfering with their ability to make decisions around land. We were talking earlier about that agricultural land being developed into condos. I guess that if developers don't get their way, they're going to be coming to you to get that overridden.

Constantly adding costs to Albertans: yeah, $25 here, not a big deal; oh, $100 here; oh, $50 there; oh, $250 over there. If only it was that small. Some of the increases I've seen in people's insurance have been ridiculous. I had one constituent bring their insurance bill in. It was almost 50 per cent higher. This was a senior. Now you want to tell them out of Bill 56: well, your cellphone bill is only going to go up just a little bit. Come on. Here's an opportunity to send this to committee, to actually go out and talk to municipalities. Maybe you might want to engage Albertans as well – I know that's been a struggle, too; we've clearly seen that – and get a better handle on this.

You know, one of the things that concerns me is with regard to MSI and how some of the funding is being front-loaded because that's going to help out. The bottom line is that you still are shortchanging municipalities. You're going to just delay the inevitable the way you've got it currently set up. Hopefully, they can make it one more year.

8:50

We have to get Bill 56 in front of the Resource Stewardship Committee – let them go out, get municipalities involved, and find out what their feedback is on this – if you actually, truly believe that committees are meant for this kind of thing, like what I heard in the 29th Legislature.

I am definitely concerned around this potentially leading to higher property taxes. You know, I know that in my constituency of Edmonton-Decore, the Edmonton city council is right now cutting back bus service down 82nd Street. Part of it is because of funding. I'm sure that if they had the opportunity to keep the buses on the road, they would, but they're going to make the lives of the constituents of Edmonton-Decore more difficult because of that, and it's easy enough to trace back to the decisions that this government has made, shortchanging municipalities. I don't understand what this beef is that you have with the municipalities of Alberta and why you think they're so out of control or something with their spending. I would never ever disagree that there are always ways to do things better – you absolutely can look at those – but that's called making cuts with a scalpel, not with a chainsaw.

Madam Speaker, if we get the opportunity to send this to the Resource Stewardship Committee, this will give us the ability to go out, find out what the implications of this bill will be not only for municipalities but ultimately for Albertans as well, get their sincere feedback, take the time to do it right, and then take the recommendations from the committee, all of them, and possibly produce a piece of legislation that will help municipalities help Albertans, because they need all the help they can get right now. We've put a foot on them to push them down already with all the costs that they've had to absorb over just the last year, just in insurance costs alone. I've seen it with my own eyes; I couldn't believe it.

I really think that you need to rethink the implications around this 911 and how you could help municipalities with this rather than just throwing them into the deep end of the pool and hoping that they're going to be able to swim. Maybe some of the larger ones can figure it out – maybe – but using, like I said, the example in Edmonton-Decore of how they're cutting back on the bus service, I have a feeling that even the big ones are struggling. What's that going to be for the smaller municipalities?

Take the opportunity, vote in favour of REF1, send this bill to the Resource Stewardship Committee, and hopefully we'll get a chance to take a piece of legislation that in its current form is pretty bad – and maybe I'll use some of the words that I've heard before in the past – and make it a little less bad by not ultimately downloading things onto Albertans, which all of us were sent here to serve.

I'm sure I'll probably have more to say about this later on, Madam Speaker, but for the time being, I will conclude my remarks, and we will see what else is said.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The member that caught my eye is the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General as the last 29(2)(a) was the opposition caucus.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise once again to, you know, respond to some of the comments that have been made by the Member for Edmonton-Decore with respect to his submissions on the referral amendment to Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

You know, Madam Speaker, if you carefully listen to all of the commentary from the members opposite, one thing is obvious. They still live as if they do not care about the economic and financial consequences facing our province. They speak as if we didn't have a pandemic. I see the Member for Edmonton-Decore heckling. I see the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar heckling as well. That is consistent with what we have seen in this particular Chamber from the members opposite: they talk, and we sit down here and we listen.

Madam Speaker, the point I was making, despite their heckling, is this. These members opposite have forgotten how we got here. Governments are elected to make responsible decisions on behalf of the people of their province, sometimes tough decisions that may not be popular but ones that are in the best interest of our province. That was the mandate that was handed over to this government in April 2019, to ensure that we protect our province's best interest. A government . . . [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, everyone has had a chance to speak when it's been their turn to speak. Right now the hon. Minister of Justice is having his turn. I would like to hear him.

Hon. Minister of Justice, please proceed.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Madam Speaker. You know, for four years, 2015 to 2019, they ran multibillion dollars in debt and deficit. They took a province with a combined debt of $13.9 billion to a record $70 billion. These members . . . [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, if you would like to have a turn to speak, you may do so when I call upon you. [interjection] Order. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, I am standing, which means that you are not speaking. There will be order in this Assembly this evening. Let's try this again.

The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Madam Speaker. You know, sometimes the blunt truth is hard for the members opposite. Those are the facts: from $13.9 billion in combined provincial government debt to a record $70 billion in four short years. It is as a consequence of the members' reckless economic policies. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Would the hon. Member for St. Albert like to wait until she is called upon to have her turn to speak in this Assembly? There will not be two conversations happening at the same time. There will be one.

The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Madam Speaker. You know, I hope that the people of our province, wherever they may be tonight, are tuning in and listening and watching this debate. That is the extent of the decorum that we get from the members opposite.

Madam Speaker, you know, for four years they ran the province into the ground and made it impossible for this province to be prepared for the unforeseen circumstances called the pandemic, and they still behave as if the pandemic has not caused an economic crisis in this province. They want us to return to their failed economic policies, that made it impossible for us to be prepared for the pandemic. That wouldn't happen. That is not what the people of Alberta expect. The referral amendment is on Bill 56, that seeks to align the municipal sustainability initiative and the Local Government Fiscal Framework Act with Budget 2021. They know that under no circumstances will this particular bill be referred to a committee because that is Budget 2021, that has already passed before the floor of this Assembly. So they can sit here and waste the time of this Assembly, but they know very well that that will never happen.

9:00

Madam Speaker, we will not return to the failed NDP economic policy. I am confident that the measures that this government has taken, has put in place are going to ensure the growth and economic vitality of our province, jobs, and opportunities. In this budget alone we are investing a record $20.7 billion over three years in capital infrastructure. As Minister of Municipal Affairs I oversaw the . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to join debate on the referral amendment on Bill 56? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Pancholi: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to speak on Bill 56. It was also a great delight to listen to the former Minister of Municipal Affairs speak about why this shouldn't go to committee because, you know, heaven forbid, the former Minister of Municipal Affairs would think that engagement and consultation with municipalities and with those affected by Bill 56 are necessary.

I believe that's likely why he's no longer the Minister of Municipal Affairs. I believe it was precisely that attitude and that lack of engagement and the broken relationship that he established with the municipalities across this province which led to the reason why he is no longer the Minister of Municipal Affairs, so perhaps his perspective and his position on that, while not unusual – I'm sure that municipalities across the province who were listening to it are not surprised; it's what they heard the entire time he was the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

But we on this side of the House, Madam Speaker, are very interested in engaging and consulting and listening to municipalities who've actually spoken out a number of times with concerns with respect to the impact of Bill 56. Now, the referral brought by my hon. colleague, to refer this to the Committee on Resource Stewardship, is precisely to give the opportunity to the government to do what they have not done already, which is to listen to municipalities.

I would like to go over a little bit about what Bill 56 does and why it's important not just specifically for those municipalities but for all Albertans, because that's what's really at stake here, Madam Speaker. For example, I mean, Bill 56, as we've talked about in this House, does a number of things. One of the things that it does is that it does extend the MSI, the municipal sustainability initiative, for another couple of years. While it is true that this Bill 56 enshrines decisions that were made by this government in their Budget 2021 to provide additional funding for this year for the MSI fund, what it does, which the government does not want to talk

about, is that it actually substantially decreases MSI funding for the next two years.

Now, here's what's important about that, Madam Speaker – we just got to listen to a lovely diatribe again from the former Minister of Municipal Affairs about the economy, but this is precisely on point for how this government has treated the economic downturn. Much of it has been created by themselves, by the fact that although, apparently, it was the responsibility of former governments to prepare this government for the pandemic, they have dropped the ball every step of the way on this pandemic. They actually, even before the pandemic – because it must be said over and over again – lost 50,000 jobs in this province and increased the deficit by $12 billion, so they actually set themselves up for failure and then have continued to fail every step of the way since the pandemic has hit, particularly with respect to economic recovery.

Actually, this bill is a perfect example of that, because, yes, while there's increased funding this year for the MSI fund for municipalities, it's going to significantly drop, by 44 per cent, for the next two years. Again, this government is living in a la-la land, where apparently this is the only year where we're going to have to be recovering from the economic downturn that they've exacerbated and made much worse for all Albertans. Apparently, in the next budget year everybody will be okay, and it's okay for municipalities to lose 44 per cent of their MSI funding because this year is going to be the year to fix it.

Well, let's talk about where we're at so far this year because it's, well, actually not even a month – it's actually only a week – into this fiscal year. We already know that once again this government is setting up Albertans and Alberta businesses for failure because they continue to drag out half measures during COVID without any additional supports that have been announced to date for businesses to get through this difficult time. They continue to ignore that, to let them fail, in fact, consistently over the past year by taking half measures at every step but failing to provide supports for workers and businesses to get through the pandemic. They've set us up for a worse economic situation than we would have been in.

Like, all jurisdictions are in a tough economic situation right now because of the pandemic, but they've made it exponentially worse. They continue to fail to provide that support, but apparently it'll all be okay in a year, right? It'll all be okay. It's okay if municipalities only get the bump in funding this year but they don't get it for the next two years. So let's hear what the municipalities, who this government does not want to listen to, have to say about that.

First of all, let's talk about what MSI does. MSI funding can be used for a number of different things. It can be used for capital projects such as building roads, bridges, public transit vehicles or facilities, emergency services facilities or equipment, water and waste-water systems, solid waste management facilities or equipment, regional or community airport facilities, other municipal buildings such as recreation facilities, sports facilities, libraries, public work buildings, cultural and community centres: all critical municipal projects. It can also be used to improve efficiency or effectiveness and increase municipal services and planning activities and provide assistance to nonprofit organizations, things that are all critical right now, but especially critical as we get into economic recovery.

This government has announced this funding for this year, but the following year, apparently, all of those projects, all of those services, they're not as required anymore by municipalities. In the city of Edmonton, where I live, where the former Minister of Municipal Affairs lives – and he should be listening to this city that he lives in. He should be listening to the constituents of the riding that he represents. The city of Edmonton is talking about: what will this 44 per cent cut mean down the road for them?

It has an impact now because, unlike this government, municipalities do have to plan ahead. They do need to make decisions now about what projects they won't be able to do in the future as a result of this cut in funding. For example, the mayor of Edmonton has spoken out very clearly about how this cut, that will be brought forward and introduced by Bill 56, will impact them. He said that these cuts essentially off-set any additional COVID supports that have been provided by this government over the last year, and it could sideline many planned projects, including roof replacements on city facilities and traffic safety upgrades.

The mayor of Edmonton said, and this is a quote, Madam Speaker, that the province's budget decision to further cut our infrastructure funding, which has already been whittled away, further impacts Edmonton's momentum and will slow Edmonton and Alberta's economic recovery, which apparently seems to be the plan from this government. They actually seem to be taking steps to actively slow our economic recovery, so this referral amendment is simply to go back to the Committee on Resource Stewardship and have that conversation, have that conversation with municipalities about what the impact of these cuts will be on their ability to recover, on their ability to drive economic recovery.

Edmonton is one of the major cities in this province, Madam Speaker. If it's not recovering, if there is no momentum for recovery in this city, it drags down the entire province. So this is a very big issue, this is why municipalities across the board are speaking out. I'm speaking. Of course, I'm a representative for an Edmonton riding, so it's my job to represent the constituents of Edmonton-Whitemud, and their mayor is speaking out and saying that these cuts in Bill 56 are going to have direct and significant impacts on them and on their quality of life and on the municipal infrastructure that they rely on, but they're not the only ones. We know that rural municipalities are going to be hit very hard, and they've already been hit hard by a number of this government's decisions to date.

This should be something of interest to all UCP MLAs – right? – because we know there are many of them who represent rural ridings. Are they listening to their municipalities who are talking about – on the tail end of a couple years of consistent hits by this government to these smaller municipalities by, you know, writing off municipal property taxes that are owed by oil and gas companies, giving them a break, which only just means downloading those costs on to the residents of these municipalities. They are saying that this is also going to significantly impact them as well. We've already heard the Member for St. Albert speak about the impact on her municipality, that she represents.

This referral to the Resource Stewardship Committee is simply to do what this government continues to refuse to do, which is to listen, to listen to the municipalities that will be affected, to find out what impact that will have on the ground. Making some boost in funding this year but cutting so significantly the following years shows that this government does not have a long-term plan for economic recovery in this province. They simply don't.

9:10

I mean, fair to say, actually, Madam Speaker, that they don't seem to have much of a short-term economic plan, either, because we know that they've already given away or let slide millions of dollars, for example, from the federal government for jobs retraining. They're not taking jobs seriously even though that was supposed to be a primary pillar of their campaign and their platform when they ran to be government. They promised Albertans jobs, they promised Albertans the economy and pipelines. They have failed on every single one of those measures to date. They've made all three of those situations worse.

And they cannot blame the pandemic solely on that because their job – they've had a year now to talk about what is economic recovery going to look like in this province, and instead it is short sighted, they have no plan for jobs, they've let millions of dollars slide from the federal government that would actually be able to put some Albertans back to work. I won't even get started on any other short-term thinking that they have with respect to things such as child care. I will mention it. They don't seem to have a plan for economic recovery, and this budget and this bill, which actually implements the budget, show that.

It shows that they have a very short-sighted view even though municipalities are struggling so much right now. They are struggling from large ones to small ones, rural, urban, whatever: they're all struggling because they are facing the same economic struggles that all jurisdictions are, except that they've had years of cuts from this government to make it worse. They are being forced to ask average Albertans, their residents, to pay more because this government has no plan.

So let's take a pause. That's what this is about. This is about taking a pause, go back to the committee, have a conversation, and really come up with a long-term plan for municipalities that doesn't shortchange them in the years ahead, because we are not going to be through our economic recovery at the end of this fiscal year, and if this government had any sense of reality, they'd know that. I mean, they don't seem to be living in a place of reality when it comes to the economy – they absolutely do not – but they need to be because Albertans are relying on them to do that. This is the opportunity for them to do that, Madam Speaker. I should think that many of the members would want to hear what their municipalities have to say and have an opportunity to hear what the impact of cutting this MSI funding in the long term for them will be, because it's going to affect not just those municipalities' constituents; it is their constituents as well. That is their obligation.

I encourage the members opposite to vote in favour of this very sensible amendment and to take that opportunity to engage and consult as needed. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Again, I want to respond to the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud on her, you know, commentary on the referral amendment to Bill 56. You know, if you sit in this particular Chamber and listen to the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, you would think that there is any shred of reality from all of the diatribe that she was involved in. There is no iota of credibility in all that you've heard tonight.

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Point of Order
Allegations against a Member

Mr. Sabir: Under 23(i) and (j). I think that the Minister of Justice is standing on 29(2)(a), which is an opportunity for a member to comment on the issue at hand or some question, while he is just making direct allegations, contrary to 23(i) and (j), on the member, that her comments lack anything close to reality and all those things. I think that those kinds of comments serve to disrupt the decorum in the House, that the minister already talked about in his earlier comments, and I think that the minister should refrain from making these kinds of allegations that will lead to disruption in this House.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Obviously, while I share the Member for Calgary-McCall's view that members should not engage in anything that would lead to, you know, a breach of process before the floor of this Assembly, the truth: there's nothing in section 23 of the Standing Orders that concludes in any shred or form that – and I have the benefit of the Blues. There's no shred of credibility. There's nothing contained in section 23 that will conclude that that causes disorder, destruction of debate before the floor of this Assembly. Madam Speaker, you know, that is a matter of debate, and it is not a point of order.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, it's not Thursday yet. I'm not sure why we're here yet again. I would not find this to be a point of order. However, given that Standing Order 29(2)(a) generally is given a wide swath for a large number of topics under questions and comments towards the previous speaker, and in keeping with that spirit, I will just add some caution, and keeping this relatively on topic I think would be helpful for the decorum of this Chamber.

The hon. Minister of Justice to finish the four minutes, 15 seconds remaining.

Debate Continued

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Madam Speaker. You know, as I was alluding to before, again, the members opposite were part of a government that inherited a technical surplus of $1.3 billion in 2015. In 2015-2016 they ran a deficit of $6.9 billion. In 2016-2017 they ran a deficit of nearly $8 billion. In 2017-2018 they ran a deficit of $10 billion.

[The Speaker in the chair]

In the month that they were defeated, April of 2019, they ran a deficit of nearly $6.9 billion whilst at the same time, Mr. Speaker, they took a combined provincial government debt of $13.9 billion to a record $70 billion. And the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud stands before the floor of this Assembly to lecture us on economy and financial responsibility. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. It's like question period in here. I think members of the Assembly are familiar with how we conduct ourselves during different periods of time of the day. Members might not like what the minister has to say, but he certainly has the right to say it. I encourage other members to take their opportunity when they're not in a sedentary position.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, that is part of the history of what brought us to the point where the members on this side of the House as government were given a mandate to ensure that we rebuild our province. That is why Alberta was not prepared for the pandemic, as a consequence of the policies of the members opposite. The Member for Edmonton-Whitemud stands before this Assembly to lecture this Assembly about economic policies when her party, then in government, ran the province to the ground. We will not return to the failed economic policies that nearly destroyed our province.

9:20

Mr. Speaker, the final point I want to make is this. You know, as the former Minister of Municipal Affairs I ensured $500 million in a municipal stimulus project plan. The bulk of that particular money is to be spent in 2021. We ensured a record $1.7 billion more in capital funding in 2021 alone from that of 2020, and over three

years we have devoted $27.7 billion in capital infrastructure despite – despite – the increases in taxes perpetuated by the members opposite that, in fact, led to billions of dollars less in taxes. They increased taxes by 20 per cent. You would think that when you increase corporate income tax, you would scoop more revenue, but the reverse was actually the case. And on their struggling economy, struggling businesses, their recipe for economic revival is more deficits, more taxes at the time that businesses are struggling. We will not return to failed economic policies of the previous government.

Mr. Speaker, the final point I want to make with respect to Bill 56 is that this is legislation that impacts Budget 2021. The members opposite can sit here and waste their time, but they know very well that Budget 2021 is already law. Therefore, Bill 56 is meant to align with Budget 2021.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the time allotted for 29(2)(a).

Is there anyone else wishing to speak to the Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021? The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for this wonderful opportunity today, for allowing me to speak here on the important topic ensuring changes that will help modernize and align the local measures act with a new 2021 budget. I oppose this amendment for many, many reasons, which wants to refer this bill to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship.

Bill 56, the Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, amends to align changes to the Local Government Fiscal Framework (LGFF) Act, and the municipal sustainability initiative, MSI, with Budget 2021. It also will aim to modernize Alberta's 911 technology through important amendments to the Emergency 911 Act.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Minister of Municipal Affairs for taking this initiative and important measure to ensure that the protection of Albertans is improved and ensuring that the MSI and the LGFF align with Budget 2021, and I would like to extend my appreciation to all Albertans and key stakeholders for listening to the numerous concerns around issues with violent crimes and serious challenges that are faced by our vulnerable population.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 56 is proposing a number of changes to the local measures act and would ensure Albertans in our local municipalities feel supported and respected. The LGFF will be implemented in 2024 and 2025 with the predictable, stable, legislated baseline funding of $722 million, which will rise or fall based on provincial revenues, and the local measures act will support Budget 2021 by extending MSI funding to 2023-2024 to provide front-loaded and flexible capital funding for municipalities. MSI funding is condensed over the next three years to an average of $722 million per year as Alberta is ensuring that we live within our means as we face the unprecedented challenges with COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's government provided $500 million to municipalities under the municipal stimulus program in 2020-2021 as part of Alberta's recovery plan, much of which will be spent in 2021. The aim is to have a future balanced budget with an assurance of creating jobs and more businesses in the province. If we continue to follow the path to pursue financial stability with our system, then this will definitely help the province and all Albertans. Let me be reminded that, again, our government's platform made a promise to make life better for all Albertans.

Domestic violence rates increase during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Alberta's government provided an additional $6.1 million to shelters across the province, ensuring that supports continue to be safe and accessible. Alberta already has one of the strongest legislations to protect and ensure all Albertans feel protected against crime. Just this year under the Vital Statistics Act legislation we made efforts to ensure that criminals do not have the opportunity to change their name, and just last year Alberta's version of Clare's law was introduced to allow vulnerable Albertans who may be at risk for domestic violence to access relevant information about their partner. This legislation, with the changes to the Emergency 911 Act, will increase the reliability of the services being provided by first responders.

Mr. Speaker, in Bill 56 we are committed to protect vulnerable Albertans with the modernization of legal legislation like the Emergency 911 Act and will increase the protection and safety of Albertans who are faced with emergency situations. It is finally the time to take action, to make the right opportunity to propose an amendment to modernize the Emergency 911 Act, which has been neglected for many, many years. These changes will modernize and update the 911 system for the first time in nearly 30 years to ensure that Albertans continue to have safe, reliable services when they call or text 911 during an emergency situation. Once the system upgrades are complete, Albertans will be able to text 911 in situations where they cannot call, which is particularly important and crucial for victims of domestic abuse. First responders will be able to locate people faster.

To cover the cost of the change, phone bills will see an increase to the 911 levy of 51 cents more per month, up from 44 cents, effective September 1, 2021. Many of us already know that customers may raise concerns about an increase to cellphone bills, but Albertans should understand the importance of maintaining the Alberta 911 system, which will support many Albertans facing challenging situations. Mr. Speaker, there is a significant risk that Alberta's 911 system will not be able to transition to NG911 without additional funding, and the government recognizes that Alberta is experiencing a significant economic downturn from the challenges of the pandemic. It is great to know that there would be no direct provincial financial implications to the government to implement these new changes to the Emergency 911 Act.

Mr. Speaker, these technology upgrades will have nothing to do with the EMS, policing, firefighters, or professions that are related to first responders. It will be simply only for the 911 emergency service system, and it will help first responders' efficacy in Alberta. These changes will allow the reduction of barriers, will improve efficiency, and will support callers and Albertans to utilize a better service, that will work regardless of who answers the phone.

The federal government, through the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, CRTC, had mandated that Canada's 911 system be upgraded to next-generation 911, NG911, technology by March 30, 2024. Mr. Speaker, our government will continue to work with other provinces and territories so that the implementation of a similar legislation or order be made, ensuring that the same goal and purpose would be attained as well and explain that this will be a step in a better direction. It would be more effective as part of a pan-Canadian approach. This is in line with other provinces and is crucial to cover the cost of the system upgrades. For example, Saskatchewan has announced that their levy will be $1.88 per month due to the differences in the provincial system. There has been minimal public push-back to recent 911 levy increases in New Brunswick.

Next-generation 911 will improve location correctness, calls to verify a caller's civic address or device location, helping locate callers in rural and remote areas and determine the height of a call. If, for example, someone is in a tall building in an urban area, a pin drop will not be required via text because the location will be provided automatically as long as the caller has some phone reception to process the call, which is done through satellite GPS.

9:30

Next-generation 911 will leverage the growth of broadband in areas underserved by cellphone coverage to make 911 calling much easier. Even in areas with poor cellphone coverage or individuals that are in areas that have broadband Wi-Fi coverage, then the call will be processed through the network under the modernized system, NG911. Again, the 911 system will work better unified and will be faster with the modern equipment introduced.

Mr. Speaker, our communities and Albertans have waited far too long for the previous government to act. It is finally time to amend and legislate laws that will help Albertans get the support and assistance they deserve. These additions will help communities and individuals that cope with trauma and help further strengthen the promotion of public safety.

The constituents of Calgary-East have been eager to see these changes that will ensure and enhance the public safety in our province. They have been in careful watch of the security of their communities as criminal activities happen when no one is observing. With these changes the safety of everyone is strengthened.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 56 will further strengthen our commitment to help ensure our vulnerable Albertans that are faced with violent crimes are being protected and have access to reliable and effective, efficient services. The changes in this bill are another step to ensure the government is taking actions to help protect families and support Albertans. The utmost duty of our government is to protect citizens and strengthen public safety for all Albertans. It is unfair to the victims of violence to be living in a province that does not have modernized systems to ensure they feel safe.

Mr. Speaker, we must do everything we can to protect the children and vulnerable Albertans. That is why it is important for this bill to pass, and there have been many groups and stakeholders who have voiced their support on this bill. The government will never stop finding solutions and communicating information that is vital for the resolution of the current situation. I know that this will receive positive remarks from other governments, and they would likely adopt these changes as we try to work harmoniously together.

Mr. Speaker, I again encourage everyone in this Chamber to support this bill and support all individuals that are dealing with the challenges and the families that are affected. Again I applaud the minister and all of the staff and team members that have been involved in the crafting of these proposed changes that will ensure the protection of Albertans and will ensure that our vulnerable population is supported and services and technology are continuously being updated to meet the demands of our modern-day world.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or comment for the Member for Calgary-East.

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and offer some of my thoughts on some of the proceedings that we've heard on Bill 56 and the amendment to refer this to committee.

I just want to start my comments, I guess, by addressing some of the things that my colleague from Calgary-East had to say about the necessary steps that the government is taking to ensure public safety. You know, this government has talked a lot about enhancing public safety, but when it comes to actually investing the resources in making the public more safe, there's no money in the bank. So here we see in this bill before us an additional levy that will cost the average family of four with cellphones an extra $25 a year to pay for 911 service that is currently costing them – whatever, it's an additional cost to have the same service that they had last year.

We see that with policing as my friend from St. Albert pointed out. Just yesterday morning at Public Accounts we raised concerns with the Ministry of Justice officials about two significant cuts that the Justice ministry has made to police funding. One through rejigging the formula for police funding, requiring a number of municipalities who never used to have to pay for police services to now have to pay. On top of that, Madam – Mr. Speaker, it's been a long evening and you've just arrived in the chair. I'm a creature of habit, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: I am certain that the hon. member wouldn't refer to the presence or absence of any member and, in particular, to the Speaker, whether I arrived or did not arrive in the chair.

Mr. Schmidt: Perhaps I should start calling Member Speaker so that the presence or absence of any particular member in the chair would not be indicated by my comments.

So, Member Speaker, what I was saying is that the Ministry of Justice has made a number of changes, so-called enhancements to public safety that have done nothing but cost the average Albertan more money to receive the same services. We saw that, as I was saying, with the police funding model changes that have charged municipalities more. We've also seen it with the government increasing the take of fine revenue to the province and remitting less of that to municipalities so that they, in turn, have less money to spend on public safety. It's really quite something to see the members of the government continue to stand up and declare themselves champions of public safety while at the same time turning around and charging the people of Alberta more than they have ever paid before for the same level of service, with no measured increase in public safety that can be seen. It's extremely concerning.

Now, I want to spend some time addressing some of the comments made by the Minister of Justice in this debate. You know, in my view, the Minister of Justice was inciting disorder. Of course, the Speaker didn't find that, but the Minister of Justice was making incredibly inflammatory remarks about our government's record with managing the finances of the province of Alberta, forcing this government to cut municipal sustainability funding so significantly. They had no choice, Mr. Speaker, because of the poor state of finances that they inherited when they were elected in 2019.

He went on to list year by year the deficits that we incurred when we were in government. I have two comments on that. So the total of those deficits that we ran in four years, this government has already exceeded in just two. It's odd that he didn't mention that. You would think that somebody who is so concerned about financial management would indicate the size of the deficits that his own government has run. What's even more interesting is that the first deficit that was run by this government was $12 billion, but when they brought forward their budget, they estimated their deficit to be $8 billion; $4 billion just went missing. My friend from Edmonton-Whitemud wonders where it went. I do, too. We certainly don't know. So it's incredibly interesting to hear the Minister of Justice claim that we mismanaged the finances of

Alberta, when in just two years they've racked up more money in deficits than we did in four.

9:40

But let's also compare what the people of Alberta got for the spending that we made when we were the government of Alberta. We had the largest school build of any province in Canadian history, Mr. Speaker; 244 schools were built. In fact, we built so many schools that the present Minister of Infrastructure wants to take credit for them when we question him on his pathetic infrastructure budget with respect to education. When we raise concerns about education funding, he points to schools that our government committed to building as a measure of success for his infrastructure program. I'm glad that he's so proud of our record of building so many schools.

We also built health care facilities, and I think of the High Prairie health care facility. That was built under our watch. The Calgary cancer centre was a significant investment. I know that was just a fancy box to some members opposite, but that fancy box is set to save thousands of Albertans' lives over the coming years.

I could happily educate the Minister of Justice on the infrastructure investments that I made as Minister of Advanced Education in postsecondary education campuses all across the province, but unfortunately the speaking time limits are so severe that I wouldn't have time in the 15 minutes allotted to me to educate the minister on the successful spending on infrastructure that we made.

That's what the people of Alberta got for the spending that we did when we were in government. What did the people of Alberta get with the spending from this government? Billions of dollars given away to massive corporations, who didn't need the money, only for them to pull up stakes and blow out of town. Where's EnCana? They're now called Ovintiv, and they live in Denver. For people who have studied under the draft curriculum of this government, Denver is not located in the province of Alberta. Where's Husky? They don't exist anymore. What has the corporate tax cut, the $4.7 billion corporate tax cut that has run up record deficits year over year, given the people of Alberta? Nothing; no jobs, no pipelines, the worst economy since 1933.

The Minister of Justice talked about the massive infrastructure investments that they made, neglecting to acknowledge that it was minuscule compared to the infrastructure investments that we made and neglecting to acknowledge that a significant portion was in the failed Keystone XL pipeline. This government threw away billions of dollars on a project that has given absolutely nothing to the people of Alberta in return. So, yes, I get a little excited when the Minister of Justice gets up and spins these stories about the state of Alberta when his government was elected, because in comparison to the mind-numbing incompetence that this government has shown in only two years, things looked pretty darn good from 2015 to 2019. That's certainly what I'm hearing from my constituents.

I want to just echo the calls of my friends from Edmonton-Decore and Edmonton-Whitemud in their support of this amendment to send this bill to committee. Now, I think it's fair to say that even though my friends from Edmonton-Decore and Edmonton-Whitemud represent Edmonton constituencies, we have constituencies that have vast cultural, linguistic differences.

The north side of the city is very different from the south side, which I'm proud to represent, but even my friend from Edmonton-Decore and I can at least find common ground on the need to send this bill to committee. Moreover, my friend from Edmonton-Whitemud represents a neighbourhood with socioeconomic status so high that I feel the need to dress up in a tuxedo every time I go door-knocking in Edmonton-Whitemud, but even her constituents, as well off as they tend to be compared to my constituents, will suffer greatly under this bill if it goes forward. That's why even she and I, even though we represent vastly different constituencies, can find common ground on the need to send this bill to committee, because we don't have a full understanding of what the impacts of this significant cut to MSI funding is going to mean for our communities.

As my friend from Edmonton-Decore said, the Minister of Municipal Affairs failed to consult with municipalities before making this decision and just sprung it on them completely by surprise. I think he's quite wise when he suggests that we pump the brakes a little bit and send this bill to committee to make sure that we have the opportunity to look at the potential impacts that this will have. He listed some of the impacts that he expected to see for his community. It definitely will result in, potentially, poor bus service. I have similar concerns for the impacts that this bill will have on the constituents of Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Now, when the mayor of Edmonton released his comments on the budget and the government's plans to cut MSI, he did go out of his way to say that a number of projects that will significantly impact the people of Edmonton-Gold Bar will still go ahead. The 50th Street overpass will still go ahead as will the south LRT extension. Now, those were projects that were funded under our government. The current government thankfully hasn't taken the axe to those projects, but I can't help but wonder what the future impacts are going to be to my part of the city.

Certainly, the infrastructure needs in Edmonton-Gold Bar are extremely great. Mr. Speaker, I represent an area that was built largely between 1945 and 1965, so all of the infrastructure in those neighbourhoods is anywhere from 50 to 70 years old, well beyond its useful life. Now, over the years we've seen the city of Edmonton invest significant amounts of infrastructure dollars in neighbourhood renewal. The neighbourhoods of King Edward Park and Bonnie Doon have been extensively renewed thanks to investment in infrastructure on behalf of the city, but there are a whole bunch of other renewal projects that are now at risk, potentially. We don't know. We don't know what the impact of these MSI cuts is going to be, but maybe those are things that are going to be at risk. I've heard similar concerns about bus service in my constituency.

So I urge all members of the House to pump the brakes, vote for this amendment so that we can consider fully the full impacts of this bill before we vote on it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I wanted to very quickly respond to the comment by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar with respect to the referral amendment on Bill 56, the Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. Again, if you sit down here and you listen to the members opposite, you would think that they are actually looking at the facts, the blunt facts. Here are the facts. He talks about Health. Budget 2021 alone increased the budget of Health by $900 million to a record $23 billion, the highest in the history of our province.

9:50

Mr. Schmidt: Where's the south Edmonton hospital? Your own constituents aren't getting a hospital. How can you face the people of Edmonton-South West when taking away their hospital?

Mr. Madu: That is the fact. You know, the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar is heckling – that's what they do – but that is a fact.

Budget 2021. You know, he started his comments by saying that there is no investment in health: a $900 million increase, a record $23 billion, the highest in the history of our province, plus $1.25 billion in pandemic spending on top, Mr. Speaker, of the $2.5 billion that was spent on the pandemic in 2020, so between 2020 and Budget 2021 a record $3.5 billion in contingency spending on the pandemic. But the members opposite would want you to believe, would want the people of Alberta to believe that this government has not made the required investment to take care of the health of our people and manage this pandemic. That's what the people of Alberta get from the members opposite by misrepresenting facts.

Mr. Speaker, you know, the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar talked about the police funding that we cut. Police funding. As Minister of Justice I can confirm to this Assembly that we maintained a hundred per cent, all of the grants that come from the Department of Justice to municipal police services, a hundred per cent – a hundred per cent. Not one cent was taken out of the grant that goes to municipal police funding. What they are referring to, and that is where the facts sometimes can be a little bit tricky for the members opposite – yes, granted, the fine revenue program, that was a change to the formula. But guess what, Mr. Speaker? The fine revenue program is pursuant to provincial legislation. Every municipality in this province understands that they do not own that pot of money, and, by the way, municipal police services are funded from the general revenue of the municipal government. That is what the members opposite would not want you to hear: facts. The nuances of the facts matter.

Mr. Speaker, you know, the referral amendment, once again, on Bill 56 – Bill 56 dealt with, essentially, MSI, the Local Government Fiscal Framework Act, and the 911 update. That's Bill 56. Bill 56 seeks to align MSI and the LGFF, the local government fiscal framework, to Budget '21, and the members understand that Budget '21 has already passed in this Assembly, and they understand that under no circumstances will that particular bill be referred to a committee of the Legislature because Budget 2021 is already in place by law. Again, the members opposite can sit here and waste the time of this Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the time allotted for 29(2)(a).

We are on REF1. I see the hon. the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I like to do the first time I speak in a week in the House, I just would like to, as always, acknowledge that we are more than a year into this pandemic. Of course, I think that we need to always thank and remember our incredible front-line heroes, particularly those working in the health care system right now, who are facing just incredible pressure and stress right now. I think we all can agree on the fact that we're very grateful for the work that they're doing and, of course, not just health care workers but all essential workers. I'm getting inundated by messages from teachers right now who are just feeling really, really stressed about this pandemic and about their safety and the safety of their students and school staff. Shout-out to all those folks if any of them are watching tonight. Thank you for that.

I will now speak to Bill 56, the Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. I've not yet had a chance to speak to this bill, and wow. There's been a lot of very thoughtful commentary on this side of the House. I think it's been a really great opportunity to talk about how we see this bill impacting our ridings. As I will outline here in the next few minutes, I'm quite concerned about the impact that this bill will have on the constituents of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

You know, we've said it multiple times. I've said it multiple times in this House. We are all truly, truly privileged to have the job that we do, and we're sent here to represent our constituents. I've just seen so many times a failure of UCP MLAs to stand up and to speak to pieces of legislation that will impact their constituents. Admittedly, I'm not going to lie to you and say that I've been inundated by e-mails on Bill 56. I absolutely have not. However, I have been inundated by e-mails by folks who are concerned about many decisions of this government and by folks who are struggling every day to make ends meet, so I want to talk a little bit about why Bill 56 I think will actually serve to exacerbate some of the challenges that at least my constituents in Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood face and I know some of my colleagues have talked about as well.

Let's get into some of the details before I share my sincere concerns about this piece of legislation. What does Bill 56 do? It extends the municipal sustainability initiative, the MSI, and it delays the implementation of the replacement program, the LGFF, the local government fiscal framework. It legislates cuts to MSI. We saw in Budget 2021 an absolutely harmful budget for people and for communities. You know, when I did some analysis of Bill 56 and as I've been writing some notes here, I couldn't help but think about the ongoing impacts or cuts, I should say – attacks perhaps is even a better word – on communities.

I thought back to how just – gosh, time is confusing now – perhaps a couple of weeks ago now, when we stood with representatives of Edmonton's community leagues, the EFCL, and we also stood and represented the concerns from Calgary community associations. They weren't able to join us in person, but we shared their concerns as well. They were so very much concerned about the cuts to funding. Sure, that's from a different pot of funding, but it's relevant to my debate on Bill 56 because it's an attack on communities. It's an attack on communities' vitality. That's what we're so concerned about. All of us in this Legislature are so proud to represent the communities that we do, but it's got to be hard for government MLAs to go home and face those communities. I can't imagine.

10:00

The responses I got when I talked, on behalf of my fantastic colleague from Edmonton-Castle Downs, about the impacts of the cuts to community grants, to the CFEP funding, how my own community leagues responded and said thank you: thank you for speaking out, thank you to the NDP, thank you to my colleague from Edmonton-Castle Downs for the work that she's doing on this file. It's about more than just, you know, perhaps a community league that can't upgrade their hall. It's about more than that. It's about public spaces, spaces where folks can gather, right? It's about parks, it's about rinks, all the things that make our communities vibrant.

I digress. Again, that's just an example of an attack on communities.

What do we see specifically in Bill 56 when it comes to MSI? Well, of course, the UCP, just like they did with CFEP – again, they're arguing that there's not a cut, but there absolutely is. We see that the cuts are – the funding is $1.2 billion from 2021 to 2022, $45 million for 2022-2023, and $45 million for 2023-2024. And the minister, the Municipal Affairs minister himself, said that municipalities will see a 25 per cent drop in funding. Of course, it's

front-loaded, as I just shared there, a rollback of 60 per cent. You know, when pressed, when asked to justify how he could possibly be making such severe cuts in the midst of a pandemic, the minister's response was something along the lines of: well, we need to do what we need to do; we've got to do what we've got to do to live within our means.

Now, the challenge in this sort of rhetoric is that Albertans are already living within their means. Albertans, many of them, many of them who I hear from all the time, are struggling right now. They're already trying to make ends meet on very, very tight budgets. And you might say: well, this is abstract; this is a cut in funding to infrastructure projects, that sort of thing; it's not impacting people directly. Absolutely not. It is directly impacting people. Those municipalities are communities. Those are communities of real humans, real humans who all of us in this Chamber represent.

This is a continued pattern of this UCP government, gutting Alberta's municipalities. We're seeing municipalities in some of the worst conditions they've been in in generations. I mean, folks in this Chamber or at least on our side of the Chamber have talked about the fact that the pattern is a long one, right? When we're talking about increased costs on Albertans, whether it's increasing provincial park fees, whether it's increases in property taxes, whether it's some of the early decisions, which we absolutely need to remind Albertans not to forget, like the deindexing of AISH, which my colleague from St. Albert – you know, we talked a lot about that one when it happened, but I know that she and I and a lot of our colleagues continue to hear from folks who are on AISH who are absolutely struggling.

What did the Premier say when we pushed back?

Ms Renaud: It won't be too onerous.

Member Irwin: It won't be too onerous. That's exactly right. It won't be too onerous.

Well, it is pretty, pretty darn rich for a man who's getting an absolutely gold-plated pension in – what? – a couple of years now, two years, maybe less . . .

Ms Renaud: Maybe less.

Member Irwin: Maybe less. I don't know. Time is confusing.

Ms Renaud: In 2023.

Member Irwin: Yeah. Very soon.

. . . to say that this would not be too onerous for those folks. I remember challenging him in this Legislature and saying . . .

Ms Phillips: A six-figure pension.

Member Irwin: A six-figure pension. Exactly.

. . . "Come to, let's say, Boyle Street in my riding of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. Come talk to folks who are struggling, folks who are on AISH, folks who are living rough, folks who aren't sure where they're going to sleep tonight, and talk to them about what's onerous." Absolutely out of touch with Albertans. When, you know, pieces of legislation like this one and others will be justified by this government, saying, "These are incremental changes; this isn't a big deal," absolutely not. These changes add up, and they impact Albertans in many, many ways.

Now, interestingly, I did a little bit of digging about some of the other specifics around this. We saw that the original plan that this government crafted is that municipalities and Métis settlements were set to share around $405 million. Now that amount is going to be cut to $340 million. I thought about how, you know, we tend to think – admittedly, I'm the representative of an urban area. My riding is considered partly inner city. It's very much an urban riding, with no suburbs or anything along those lines, so I admit fully that that's the lens that I come to this debate with.

But I've talked a lot about the fact that I've spent more of my life living in rural Alberta than I have in urban Alberta. I grew up in Barrhead, taught in Bawlf and Forestburg, lived in Camrose in those formative years of my life, and I wouldn't have changed it for the world. I can tell you that I still talk to a whole heck of a lot of rural Albertans, and I still have those connections. My dad lives north of a place called Fort Assiniboine, near somewhere called Topland, that you can hardly find on a map. There is a cemetery there and a hall. You know, I'm certain that I can speak with some level of certainty on the fact that a lot of rural Albertans are feeling pretty hurt by this government right now. They're hurting in a lot of ways. It's not just urban municipalities who are getting the raw end of the deal although they're certainly hurting as well.

I have to mention Métis settlements. Métis settlements are getting a cut, the same Métis settlements that have been absolutely ignored by this government under another piece of legislation that's before us right now. Again, it's Albertans from all walks of life who are being impacted by this legislation. What is that going to mean for Métis settlements that are going to be dealing with fewer dollars in the midst of a pandemic?

We're seeing – you know, I've talked about this pattern, that our communities are basically being left to sink or swim, being told to essentially fend for themselves. My colleague the Municipal Affairs critic from Calgary-Buffalo talked about the fact that, listen, this is happening at a time when communities, municipalities are looking for assistance. We're in the midst of a pandemic. They're looking to be able to rebound from this pandemic. He said, and I quote: "It's not good news. It's less money. It's less stability at the municipal level. It's less predictable."

My colleague from Edmonton-Whitemud talked a lot about the fact that we should be looking at economic recovery right now, right? Communities need to be – this is exactly the time when we need to be investing. We need to be investing in infrastructure projects, not cutting. You know, for a government and a minister over there that rants about fiscal sense, it seems that this is sorely lacking. If there is any way I can bring up one of my passions, and that's curriculum, I think about how as a social studies teacher we would teach economics at the grade 12 level, and we would talk about the evidence that shows that at a time of recession, depression the answer is not to cut. We're talking about Keynesian economics here. We're talking about sound fiscal policy. The answer is to invest and to stimulate, yet . . .

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Minister of Justice.

10:10

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to respond to the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood with respect to her commentary on the referral amendment and indeed on Bill 56 overall. You know, listening to her, you would think that this bill would gut municipalities. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are front-loading, in Budget 2021-2022, $1.96 billion. That is on top of the $500 million that the Premier and I announced late last year in the municipal stimulus program, the bulk of which is to be spent in 2021.

I want to also make some corrections so that the record will reflect what this Bill 56 would do because listening to the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, she referenced the fact that it

will cut MSI from that $1.96 billion to $45 million in 2022-2023 and $45 million in 2023-2024. Those were her words. To be clear, in 2022-2023 it will be $485 million and in 2023-2024 it will be another $485 million, not $45 million, Mr. Speaker. I think it's important that we make that particular correction so that the record will reflect that.

Again, Mr. Speaker, you know, the only people that don't understand that we need to be good stewards of Alberta's tax dollars are the members opposite. The people of Alberta get it. But they talk as if they can eat their cake and have it. They say that we are running debt and deficit, that we run deficits; at the same time they say we are cutting. We have a record deficit in Alberta's history, more than $20 billion, because of the pandemic and because of the mess that the previous government made of Alberta's economy. We have opened up the treasury to make sure that we protect lives and livelihoods during this pandemic, and that is why a record $900 million in health funding – $23 billion, the highest in the history of our province, more than the NDP allocated for health in 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and, before they were fired by Albertans, in 2019.

You know, Mr. Speaker, again, you would think that when you raise taxes, which was the beginning and the end of the NDP's economic policy: raise taxes, run debt and deficit, pluck money from the trees. That is the end and the beginning of their economic policies. The truth is that they did that. They increased corporate income taxes by 20 per cent, from 10 to 12 per cent. What was the result? They took multibillion dollars less in corporate income taxes because their policies chased corporations and companies and job creators away from our province, and there were no companies' profits to tax. You would think that they would have learned from that. They talk about 50,000 jobs lost in the first year of this government. If there were 50,000 jobs lost, it was as a consequence of the mess that they made. [interjections] We were sworn in in May of 2019 . . .

Ms Pancholi: You are the most ineffective government there is, apparently.

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member . . .

Ms Pancholi: I can't help it.

The Speaker: No, you can help it.

Ms Pancholi: I can't.

The Speaker: You can, and you will.

Ms Pancholi: I'll try.

The Speaker: You will.

Ms Pancholi: I will.

The Speaker: You will.

Speaker's Ruling
Decorum
Addressing the Chair

The Speaker: I appreciate that you might not like what the minister is saying. The minister, however, provided members the courtesy to be respectful when they were speaking. You might not like his content; I'm convinced he didn't like other content that he heard this evening. But one thing I haven't seen is him treating other people disrespectfully from his chair, as I have seen from some members of the Assembly.

I would also like to take this opportunity to provide a caution to the minister. On a number of occasions during your previous remarks you have referred to the member as "she." I think that it's important, particularly as we proceed into the evening, that we do everything that we can to refer our comments through the chair, and perhaps if we were to depersonalize some of the debate, it would be less impactful to the personal response that some members of the Chamber may be feeling.

Debate Continued

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will be the first, you know, to acknowledge, I mean, your caution. Indeed, we should be able to speak to debates through the chair and the Speaker, but, again . . .

The Speaker: Unfortunately, that concludes the time allotted for 29(2)(a).

Is there anyone else wishing to join on the amendment? The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak in support of the referral amendment, and I will try to speak specifically to the bill. As I understand it, Bill 56 does three things. It extends the municipal sustainability initiative and delays the implementation of the local government fiscal framework; second, it legislates the cuts to the MSI program; and, third, in order to fund updates to the 911 system that is federally mandated, they're increasing the monthly cellphone bill tax by 51 cents. These are important changes, and they will impact how municipalities run their affairs in this year and coming years.

Mr. Speaker, with these changes the government is doubling down on their failed strategy, and they are doubling down by off-loading the costs onto the municipalities. Municipalities are far worse off today than they have been in generations, and these changes coupled with other changes respecting municipalities that this government has implemented – the cumulative impact of these changes is huge. Prior to this they have increased costs for municipalities, they have increased costs for everyday Albertans by increasing park fees, by deindexing the income tax system, and Albertans and those municipalities have been impacted by the rising taxes and property taxes. And coupled with all of these changes, it's becoming difficult day by day for municipalities and Albertans to get by.

10:20

The minister has talked about the economy and how all of these somehow are making the economy better, but the people we talk to, municipal leaders we hear from do not agree with that. There is enough evidence, there is enough data that shows that Albertans are far worse off because of this government's policies. The government ran on a platform of jobs, economy, and pipelines. These are just hard facts, stats from Stats Canada, that before the pandemic, before the pandemic even hit, Albertans lost 50,000 jobs under this UCP government's watch. Before the pandemic hit, this government racked up $12 billion in deficit, the deficit which no Albertan is better off for. They promised Albertans that their policies will bring prosperity.

The Minister of Justice was talking about failed policies. As a student of economics I can say that trickle-down economics, even if it's not in economics, is pretty much a trick. They followed blindly the policies of trickle-down economics that have failed across the globe, that have been rejected universally. The last Nobel prize in economics went to an economist who actually argued against cutting taxes for the rich. That doesn't bring prosperity. The government brags about cutting taxes from 12 to 8 per cent, that

that will bring jobs back to Alberta. That was not supposed to happen, and that did not happen.

Many companies in Calgary who benefited from that handout took that handout and went elsewhere, in other jurisdictions that have far higher taxes than Alberta. Some of them invested in Saskatchewan. Some of them went to the east coast. Both those jurisdictions have higher taxes than here in Alberta. If we were to believe this government's logic that somehow decreasing taxes magically sets up Alberta for investment and success, we have evidence just from the last two years that that is not true. In particular, these policies and the policies before this have adversely impacted the city of Calgary.

Our downtown is sitting at a 30 per cent vacancy rate. We are among the cities with the highest unemployment rate. With the green line project we had hope, we had a chance to set up our city for success by adding that critical infrastructure and by creating at least 20,000 much-needed jobs. That project has been delayed. Now with these further cuts it means that there will be less money for municipal initiatives, it means that they will have less ability to create jobs, and it means that Albertans will be paying more to get less. Those costs do add up.

Earlier the Minister of Justice said that they have maintained the justice grants, policing grants to the municipalities. If we talk about the city of Edmonton, they are getting $5 million less just this year alone, and they have reached out to the minister's office, exactly outlining how they're getting less money. If we talk about Calgary, in Budget 2019, the previous budget, they were getting $13 million less. It's quite possible that some grants going out of Justice to the municipalities are maintained. But the province is getting a larger share of ticket revenue, and that's $10 million. The city is paying a larger share for forensic testing. They're getting less revenue from cannabis; that alone was $13 million less that the city was getting.

Also, when the mayors of these cities are saying these things, when police services are saying these things, when everybody else is seeing these cuts, we cannot take this government's word that there are no cuts. They don't have that kind of credibility. For months they insisted that they didn't change anything respecting the coal policy. For months they insisted they didn't change anything with respect to parks. But Albertans certainly found out that, no, they did change the coal policy, they did change the fee schedule for Alberta's park users. All of those things are adding costs for Albertans at this difficult time.

Every time the minister gets up and talks about record investments in health, when we account for population growth and inflation, the Health budget is $6 million less than it should be.

10:30

One thing I can give credit to this government for: their record fights with doctors. No government in Alberta, across Canada, across the globe did that during the pandemic. That was a record. The Minister of Health walks to somebody's driveway, some doctor's driveway, yells at them, berates them: that's a record. Displacing the doctors' master agreement by dint of the law during the pandemic: that's a record. Firing 11,000 workers from health care: that's a record. When it comes to health care, I do not think that Albertans will remember this government for their investments; they will remember this government for their fights with doctors, for firing front-line health care workers, for disrespecting health care professionals. That will be the legacy of this government.

Mr. Speaker, in short, this bill will hurt municipalities, and we cannot support this.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West on 29(2)(a).

Ms Phillips: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I listened to the hon. member talk about a number of the reasons why, of course, we are looking for the government to consult further on this bill and undertake a committee process, and I'm wondering what the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall might think that he might hear from his own constituents in Calgary northeast with respect to what the government might hear if they were to be so bold as to undertake a committee activity and, in fact, a public exercise if this bill were to be referred.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you to my colleague for the important question. I think that earlier the Justice minister mentioned that this bill is tied to the budget. I have had the opportunity to talk to many of my constituents with respect to many of the initiatives that are contained in this budget. I think for a year or so – many people in my riding are in front-line jobs. They are in jobs that, for the most part, cannot be done from home, so they do not have an option of working from home, and I do not believe that this government supported them properly throughout this pandemic. Instead, at one point the government and Premier did blame them for spreading the virus.

When there was an opportunity to provide support to my constituents and many hard-working front-line Albertans through a federal program, the government took 282 days to apply for that program, and when they applied for that program, they set the criteria in a way that would exclude many from applying for that benefit such as cab drivers and Uber drivers. Then they also added another layer there, that those workers won't be able to apply on their own. Rather, it will be their employer applying for them and will get $35 million in admin costs in all that.

Then in June my constituents were hit by the fourth-largest natural disaster in Canadian history, and, again, this budget does absolutely nothing to help them at this time. On top of that, what we are seeing is that the government removed the cap from insurance; now their insurances are going through the roof. The government removed the 6.8 cents per kilowatt hour cap from the regulated rate option of electricity; now their bills are going through the roof. All those costs get added to what this piece of legislation is trying to do. At the end of the day when the city will have less to spend on its constituents' priorities, when the city will have less to spend on its projects, when the city will have less to spend on its services, those costs get passed on to the city's residents. That's what has been happening under this government's watch. They have gutted municipalities budget after budget, and that's simply wrong.

The Speaker: Hon. members, this concludes the time allotted for 29(2)(a).

Is there anyone else wishing to speak to the referral amendment? I see the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise to speak in favour of the referral amendment to send this bill to a committee for further study. Now, the hon. members in the government caucus and within Executive Council have made representations to this Chamber that we require passage of this bill in an expeditious fashion because it gives practical effect to the budget, a budget that they have characterized as a substantive plan to address the jobs and economic crisis in the province, a claim that betrays a large chasm of darkness between reality and statement. There's almost no Venn diagram in which those two statements belong together.

This is, in fact, a budget and therefore an approach to municipal finance that simply does not do what the government purports that

it does. Albertans have seen this, which is why, from some public opinion research that I saw recently, two-thirds of Albertans don't like this budget, which is a very high number. It is mercifully a better number than the Premier's approval ratings, so at least there's that small mercy within it. But the fact of the matter is that this is not an approach that is supported by the vast majority of Albertans. The government would learn that if they went to a committee process and took this approach to municipal finance to the people that it most affects, that is to say some kind of committee exercise that engages Albertans in a direct way.

In fact, it is an approach that I would recommend to the government if I was in the business of giving free political advice. The reason for that is that so many Albertans are feeling like they are not being listened to. They do not trust the representations made by either Executive Council or their local UCP MLAs, and they do not have confidence in either the economic plan or the approach, in particular, to management of the response and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic or the health care system more generally in its capacity to respond to our immediate needs now with respect to a pandemic or our needs over time.

Now, the committee experience is one that we do have some experience with in this Legislature. I do recall a government at the end of 2013 that found itself – had proposed a number of unpopular measures, not the least of which was severe changes that severely compromised the retirement security of public-sector workers and took advantage of the fact that those public-sector pension plans were, in fact, money that was contributed by those workers. It was not the government's to play around with. But that deeply unpopular government at the time, with a premier in that chair that faced a caucus revolt and stunningly low approval ratings, took their pension plans to committee. This was in late 2013, early 2014. And what did the government learn when they did that? What did they learn? They learned that people didn't like it. People didn't want it. It was vote determining. What they learned more than anything was the proposals to pick their pockets and chip away at the retirement security with the money that they had contributed into those public-sector pension plans. MLAs at the time, in 2014, learned that Albertans did not look kindly upon that course of action, and the government abandoned it.

10:40

Now, ultimately, it did not save that deeply unpopular government, as we all know, or that deeply unpopular Premier. Who knows what fate might befall this collection of individuals on the government side if they were to undertake such a course of action? But it would at least be a good-faith engagement with Albertans. They would have to look them in the eye and say: "Okay; we're cutting your funding to your cities and towns. You can expect, if you want the same level of service, that you will pay more property taxes. That is what will happen. Here is the plan. Now let's discuss it." If the government is, in fact, so confident in their approach, as we have heard in some of the representations I hear tonight in this Chamber – a significant amount of hubris has accompanied the representations by some hon. members that the glory days of 2019 are still here; they're not – that Albertans support this course of action, if they are, in fact, so confident as to that support, then they should have no problem at all voting in favour of this referral.

The fact of the matter is that tapping the brakes on a deeply unpopular budget at a time of a caucus revolt, at a time when Albertans have very serious questions about the trajectory of leadership, Albertans of all backgrounds – there are issues of trust, of accountability, of transparency. Albertans of all backgrounds are experiencing this right now. We may disagree on the substance of our deep misgivings about the leadership and the trajectory of this province and the priorities as expressed within the budget documents and this piece of legislation. We may disagree on that substance, but the fact of the matter is that those views are deeply held by an increasing majority of Albertans. Those Albertans deserve to be heard about plans to saddle them with yet another property tax bill, about plans to jack whatever fees that they might have to pay in their municipality, even if it's just to go to the pool, finally, for us parents who can get our kids outside and get them to the rec centre or do the other activities at the local YMCA. We're all really wanting to go and do those things.

There will be so many municipalities across this province, whether it's when we can finally go and play hockey next fall, whether it's our fees for rental of soccer fields or any of these things. These cuts show up in picking the pockets of those families when life finally returns to normal. This is on top of the increases to car insurance, home insurance, various other fees, camping fees, you name it, just being nickeled and dimed at every possible turn, literally now having to pay more for 911 service, which is also contained within this bill and will come as, I think, a great surprise to the majority of Albertans. Somehow, you know, this government found a way to stick them with more costs in an area of jurisdiction that is almost exclusively federal. And yet – and yet – this government found another way to give Albertans a higher bill.

If there is, in fact, confidence in this plan, then there should be no problem in engaging Albertans across the province in municipalities big and small. There should be no problem coming to Lethbridge to discuss why we have not got a planned investment in the highway 3 bridge. There should be no problem in coming to Lethbridge to discuss the transfer of EMS dispatch services, a unilateral move that prompted the mayor of Lethbridge to call on the Minister of Health to resign. There should be no problem having a conversation with municipalities like Lethbridge, where we have got to ensure that we expand our industrial and commercial tax base. Why? Because most of our tax base is on residential ratepayers, and it puts a big squeeze on homeowners and others.

But how do you do that in a community like Lethbridge? Well, you certainly don't do it by firing hundreds of people in the postsecondary system and therefore having knock-on effects in procurement and economic drivers within the entire city. One certainly does not do that when one puts a chill on agricultural investments, because there is now investor uncertainty with respect to water allocations. One certainly does not do that with putting a chill on innovation and renewables and so on through some of the ridiculous ventures that have also been funded through this budget, not the least of which is the war room.

There should be no problem with taking this piece of the budget implementation and putting it in front of Albertans for their careful scrutiny. There should be no problem for UCP members in and around Edmonton to discuss with constituents why they were supposed to get a southwest Edmonton hospital and now they're not. Just answer the question, you know? If there is so much confidence, then provide that answer. It's not a problem. Shouldn't be.

We have to take responsibility for our actions in this work. Sometimes the events that befall us in government are not our doing, yet we still have to take responsibility for them and do the best we can. We also have to take responsibility for the things that are our fault, and the way we do that is by talking to Albertans. We do not hide from them. We engage them because they will notice if one does not. They will notice. They certainly noticed with that plan that went to a committee and travelled around the province, the previous PC plan to raid public-sector pensions. Albertans

absolutely did notice. Yeah. And it contributed certainly to a change of leadership. There's no question about this. Albertans noticed.

Now, it may be that this is absolutely a hundred per cent supported by the people of Alberta, and I would be happy to be corrected in my foregoing statements, Mr. Speaker. I would be happy to have that conversation with Albertans and go out and say: "Okay. Your property taxes are going to go up. Here are your changes in funding from the province." If people said, "Okay," well, then I would be happy to be corrected. I don't think that's the answer that I would get, particularly given the levels of deficit spending, deficit finance spending, and in particular given the outcomes of what Albertans have actually seen as a result of that spending, the kinds of supports that have actually been given to communities, to workers and the businesses that they work for.

There is no wonder that Albertans are wondering: where is this deficit going? What are we spending money on? Why does there seem to be no accountability? They haven't seen that support. They've been asked to sacrifice over and over and over again in large cities, in small towns, in rural communities. Families, elderly people, folks looking for work: they've been asked to sacrifice over and over again. They see a government blowing billions on heaven knows what, yet they don't see any help in their daily lives. They don't see any small-business support during this pandemic. They know what kinds of public policy measures might help, yet they don't see it. No wonder they're not amused.

But if a committee process undertook a real consultation in those communities big and small, then we might find that those answers that seem so obvious to most people, except for some here, might actually be internalized because they have come from the people where the decisions affect them. It is for that reason that I commend to the UCP caucus and to the government caucus members, rather – sorry – an approach and a strategy of bravery. Let's undertake to engage thoughtfully with the electorate, with our constituents, find out what they think about this budget right now. We have public opinion polling that shows us that two-thirds of Albertans don't like it. Let's go out and test that theory. Let's just do that.

10:50

Mr. Stephan: Did you guys do that with the carbon tax?

Ms Phillips: I mean, the hon. Member for Red Deer-South clearly wants to join us. He's apparently got half a foot out anyway of his own team, but the fact of the matter is that maybe he does have the kind of bravery that he wants to engage his own constituents in a conversation about municipal funding. He might. He might. We know that the hon. member, for example, has, you know, expressed discomfort with the level of indebtedness and the spending priorities. That is fair enough. His constituents sent him here to deliver a certain message. For that reason, the hon. Member for Red Deer-South ought to support this referral and take this conversation about municipal funding levels and relative levels of indebtedness and taxation on the road and into a meaningful consultation.

For that reason, Mr. Speaker, I urge all members of the House to vote in favour of this.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or comment. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood has the call.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and as always, I'm just very engaged in my colleague from Lethbridge-West's comments. Particularly, she had a good sort of summary of some of the ways that Bill 56 will impact her community of Lethbridge specifically. I would love if she could expand on that a little bit more, just talk about some of the impacts. I mean, I've talked a lot about Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. My colleagues have talked about each of their ridings. We know that my colleague from Lethbridge-West works so hard for not just her riding but for all of Lethbridge and has an intimate understanding of her community, so if she could just expand on that a little bit.

Ms Phillips: Thanks to my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood for that question. There is no doubt that reductions in the MSI funding over time will then put pressure on other parts of the city of Lethbridge's budget, forcing difficult choices of whether to reduce services, as they had to do in response to some cuts from the province last year and reduced the funding to Lethbridge police service by $1 million. That is absolutely something that happened. But it will also put pressure on other lines of investment for the city of Lethbridge.

I'm thinking specifically here of programs that support small business in our downtown and our downtown revitalization and our downtown BRZ. That has been an ongoing challenge, to meet the tremendous needs of poverty and addictions and other health care needs and the desire on the part of the people of Lethbridge to develop our downtown in a way that is sustainable, in a way that supports small business, in a way that is consistent with the character of this city, that incorporates the arts, the performing arts, the visual arts, certainly a very vibrant music scene, and other ways that – you know, Lethbridge is a small-ish city, but it certainly has those elements of livability that make it unique in many ways.

It will also put pressure – because there have been reductions in other areas and now reductions in MSI, there will be specific programs or expense lines that will have to either be reduced almost entirely or be subjected to some kind of user fee scheme. I'm thinking here of – for example, there will be definitely deferred flood mitigation and other climate adaptation projects. Those are big words for moving intake in water treatment from here to there because of water levels and how they are changing. There are certainly a number of those kinds of projects that have also been reduced from other government lines that in some ways were being addressed through MSI, but now neither thing is going to be there.

There is no question that the city's ability to invest in housing will be compromised by this. Some 20 years ago the city of Lethbridge undertook an initiative called social housing in action and was one of the first small cities to undertake public housing initiatives to address the housing needs that were identified by the mayor and council at that time. Those efforts will be frustrated, which then feeds again into the ability for small business to thrive when we have so many very urgent and dire housing needs in the city.

There is no question that FCSS budgets even are put under pressure when AISH and income supports are deindexed so that there is more need in the community for the kinds of services that are delivered through FCSS. There is no question that the reduction in CFEP and CIP and the restructuring of those programs will then cause nonprofits to look to the city, to look to other sources of funding and, not finding them at the city, will have to do things to increase user-fee revenues and so on and creating a very unvirtuous circle of downloading costs. When we say downloading costs onto municipalities, there's something quite theoretical about that. This is downloading it into people's pockets, and that's why they don't like it.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the time allotted for 29(2)(a).

Are there others looking to speak to amendment REF1?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call the question.

[Motion on amendment REF1 lost]

The Speaker: We are back on the bill, Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021.

I'm sorry. I was just merely mentioning that we were on the bill. Is the minister rising to speak to the bill?

Mr. Madu: No, Mr. Speaker. Motion to adjourn.

The Speaker: Okay. You're moving to adjourn debate, correct?

Mr. Madu: Yes.

The Speaker: Okay.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do want to thank all members of the Assembly for a productive debate on Bill 56. It's been a good evening, you know, listening to the comments of members on both sides of the aisle.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I move that the Assembly be adjourned until 1:30 p.m. on Thursday, April 8, 2021.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 10:59 p.m.]

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